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EMPIRE

JANUARY 2025

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Photography Director
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ALEX GODFREY

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Reviews Editor
JOHN NUGENT

News Editor
BETH WEBB

Associate Editor (Production)
LIZ MOODY

Editor-In-Chief (Digital)
JAMES DYER

Deputy Online Editor
BEN TRAVIS

Editorial Assistant
WHITNEY JONES

Editor-At-Large
HELEN O'HARA

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
Hayley Campbell, Ian Freer, Boyd Hilton, Dan Jolin, Bill McConkey, Ian Nathan, Christina Newland, Kim Newman, Nev Pierce, Paul Shipper, Adam Smith, Amon Warmann

CONTRIBUTORS
Words: Siddhant Adlakha, Catherine Bray, Rick Burin, Sophie Butcher, Shivam Chowdhary, Tom Ellen, Jamie Graham, Al Horner, Michael Jones, Matt Kamen, Ella Kemp, Jordan King, Christina Newland, David Opie, Olly Richards, Mike Ryan, Amelia Tate, Laura Venning, Terri White
Photographers: Ollie Adegboye, @fizzysodatoes, Jimmy Fontaine, Marco Vittur
Illustrations: Arn0, Matthew Brazier, Marta Kochanek, Bill McConkey, Nada Maktari, Russell Moorcroft
Design: Russell Moorcroft
Subbing: Julie Emery, Eddy Gardiner, Lucy Williams

PRODUCTION
Print Production Controller
Carl Lawrence 01733-468858
Ad Production Controller
Jackie Doran 01733-468107
ePublishing Production Director
Alan Kindell 020-7859 8604

ADVERTISING
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Head Of Classified
Imogen Jackaman 01733 459278
Inserts Manager
Simon Buckenham 020 7075 0812

MARKETING
Head Of Marketing
Sarah Norman
Marketing Manager
Zoe Blanchflower
Marketing Assistant
Sofie McIntyre

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Helen Morris
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"Stop making E.T. sexy!"

Marco Vittur

EMPIRE
WELCOME

THIS MONTH, ONE of us found ourselves summoned to a shadowy chamber. There sat a mysterious stranger, a man accustomed to creating carnage. What followed in that room involved blood-curdling screams, the howling of wolves and images that would be hard to shake.

No, we weren't meeting Count Orlok from *Nosferatu* — don't be ridiculous. But we were doing the next best thing. In late October, our intrepid features editor, Alex Godfrey, was invited to a screening room in London (sadly, he took the Tube rather than a haunted, driverless carriage) to join director Robert Eggers in watching scenes from the film. Fortunately, Eggers proved much better company than the ancient vampyre upon whom his new film turns — he was happy to talk us through the on-screen grotesqueries in magnificent detail. Head to page 90 to read all about it.

Nosferatu hits UK cinemas on 1 January: talk about getting the year off to a good (and grisly) start. That leaves another 364 days to fill with high-grade entertainment, but fortunately 2025 has your back. In a particularly stuffed-with-gold preview, we bring you the first word on films including the new *Jurassic World*, the new *Captain America*, the new *Tron* and the new *Spinal Tap*. Plus, interviews with the likes of Renée Zellweger, Pharrell (actual Pharrell, not the LEGO one), Florence Pugh and Ben Stiller.

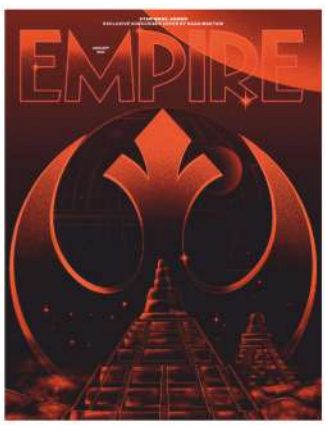
And then there's *Andor*. Of all the new *Star Wars* tales of late, this is the one that's most unified the *Empire* office in praise. We love its political intrigue, propulsive pacing, ruthless plot-twists and smart writing ("I burn my life to make a sunrise that I know I'll never see"? You said it, Luthen Rael). So we're extremely excited to bring the first word on the second and final season, via interviews with showrunner Tony Gilroy, Diego Luna and more, without a single Bothan fatality.

Death Stars, dread vampires *and* the return of the band behind 'Stonehenge'? 2025 looks set to be sizeable indeed.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen



SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Nada Maktari
Artist and architectural designer Nada, lauded for her movie posters, worked for *Empire* on our hugely popular *Dune: Part Two* subs cover (October 2023), and as a major *Star Wars* fan was the perfect choice for *Andor*.

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

ALEX GODFREY SPOKE TO DIRECTOR ROBERT EGGERS

"After sitting in a screening room with the filmmaker and watching various sequences from his gothic horror *Nosferatu* with him, we got this photo. I then took a look at it. 'You're all in the shadows,' I said, showing it to him. 'Perfect!' he said. Fair enough."

BETH WEBB HOSTED *EMPIRE*'S LFF GALA SCREENING

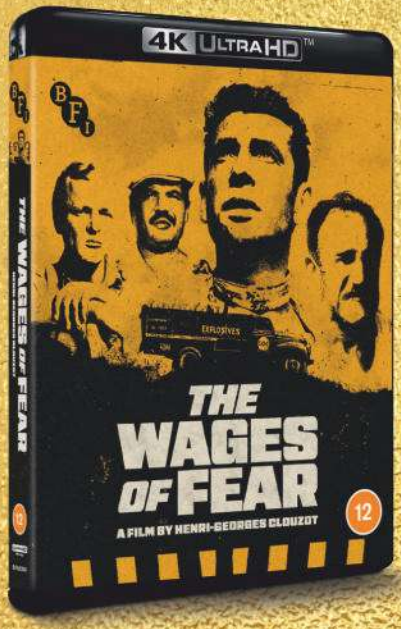
"A full house of raucous cinephiles gathered at the Prince Charles Cinema for our BFI London Film Festival presentation of *The Balconettes*. The film's stars kicking off their high heels immediately after our on-stage introduction will be one of my highlights of the year."

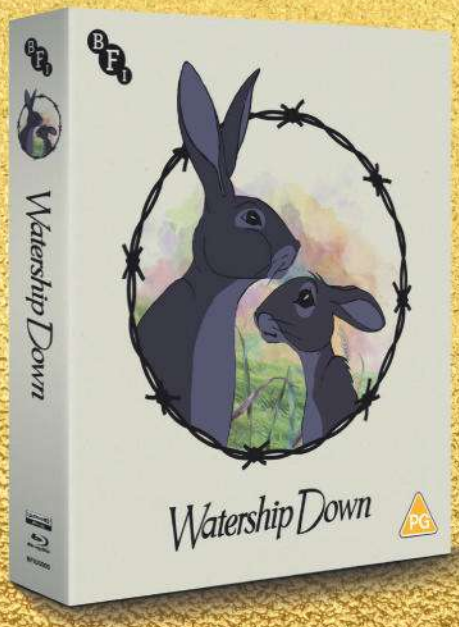
CHRIS HEWITT HOSTED A DENIS VILLENEUVE Q&A

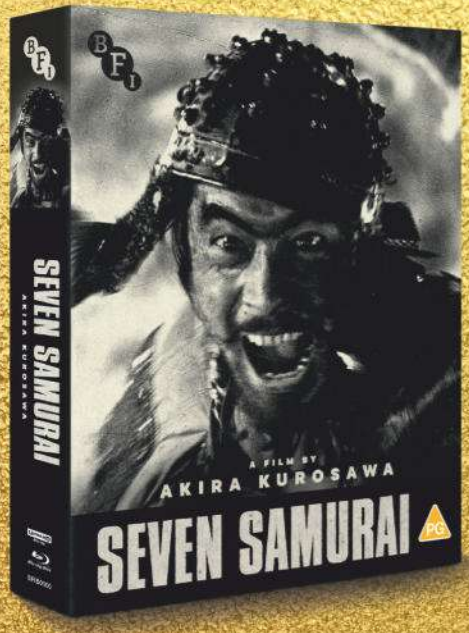
"I was truly honoured to host our latest Empire VIP Club event, a *Dune* Masterclass from the *Dune* Master himself, Denis Villeneuve. In front of a large audience, we talked sandworms and space bagpipes. Thankfully, we didn't have to fight to the death at the end."

Spinelines issue 434: Newsstand: "Mickey, can I have my locker back?" is from *Rocky II*. Subs: "Seventeen. Okay, you guys got yourself a ship. We'll leave as soon as you're ready. Docking Bay 94" is from *Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*.

4K UHD GIFTS FOR FILM LOVERS







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EMPIRE

COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

KINGS OF CONVENIENCE

I found an unread copy of *Empire* from earlier in the year hidden down the side of the sofa and read your review of *Perfect Days* [issue #425], which had completely passed me by. I rented it and was absolutely transfixed. Thank you for giving it the space it deserves in the magazine — I would never have guessed that one of my favourite films of the year would centre on a man cleaning toilets.

STUART MASTERSON, TUNBRIDGE WELLS

It's a really lovely film, isn't it — the best toilet-based film since 2006's Flushed Away. *Stuart, for your potty-mouthed praise, please have a Picturehouse membership on us.*

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

ON A POSSIBLE SEQUEL TO *PADDINGTON IN PERU*:
Big swing next time: Paddington vs Terrifier.
PETE KEYES

FIT FOR A PRINCESS (BRIDE)

In 1987, my parents took me at 12 years old to see a movie whose title had me thinking it would be a lame 'for girls' story. Instead, *The Princess Bride* instantly became one of my favourite films. To see it featured as the Masterpiece [issue #434] was simply wonderful.

MICHAEL WEYER, DOWNERS GROVE, ILLINOIS

The Princess Bride *being labelled as anything less than a masterpiece? Inconceivable!*

Just about to start one of the highlights of every holiday… doing the #EmpireMagazine crossword whilst ligging on a sun-lounger.
@CHEMALINO

INSIDIOUS, SO PERFIDIOUS

Now that *Agatha All Along* has revealed who Teen really is, can we please agree on a suitable punishment for your writer who spoiled the show's biggest twist before the episode ['Toil & Trouble', issue #431]? I suspect the majority of readers were more than a little pissed off at this!

IAIN MACKINNON, VIA EMAIL

Sincere apologies that you felt spoiled, Iain. In our defence, we genuinely had no idea who the Teen was — we were purely reporting on existing online speculation. Hopefully the show was spooky enough to still be worth your time.

IN MEMORIAM
AUBREY DAY

Empire was shocked and saddened to hear of the passing of our former colleague Aubrey Day, who edited our US edition from 2011 to 2015, before working in film marketing and screenwriting. He was a fine, funny and insightful writer and supportive friend. In the movie business, as William Goldman wrote, "Nobody knows anything"... but Aub knew more than most. We send our condolences to his wife Karima and children Aidan and Ethan, of whom he was intensely proud.

MARK DINNING
FORMER *EMPIRE* EDITOR

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

THE 'WHERE ARE THEY NOW?' COLUMN OCTOBER 1991

In the pre-IMDb era, it was nearly impossible for curious film fans to know what had happened to stars who had faded into obscurity. Enter the 'Where Are They Now?' column, which began taking reader queries in October 1991. Our journalists tracked down hundreds of seemingly forgotten figures, from the more familiar (Alex Winter, Molly Ringwald) to the deeper cuts (a girl who played a granddaughter of Peter Cushing in the 1965 film *Dr. Who And The Daleks*). In one startling 1994 entry, *Empire* had to break the news to readers that John Cazale — whom the column received "more letters about than anyone" — died in 1978. Despite the rise of the internet, the column remained a staple for years, and *Empire* historians can find no trace of it sometime after 2013 — making this, ironically, a 'Where Are They Now?' column about 'Where Are They Now?'.

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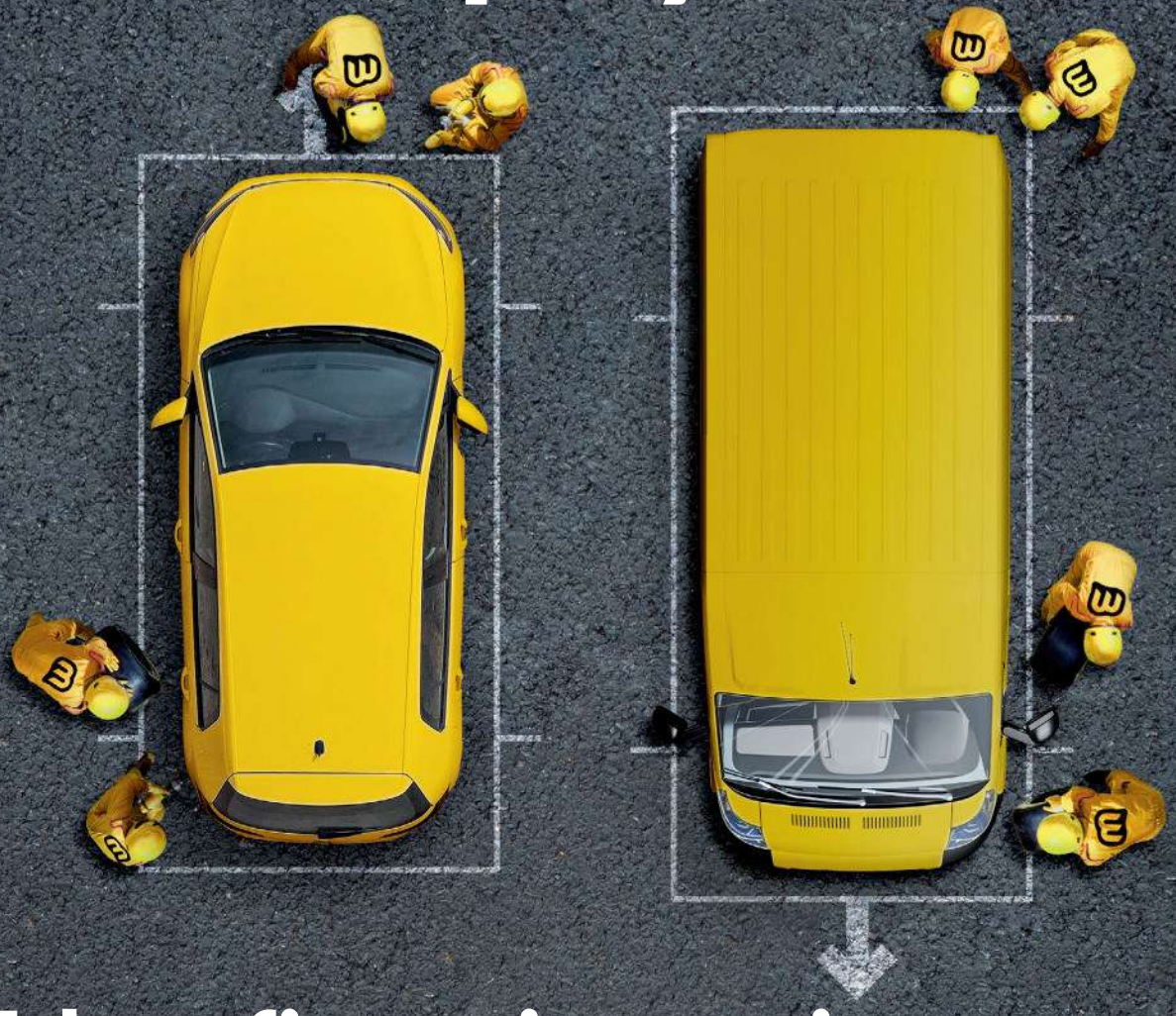

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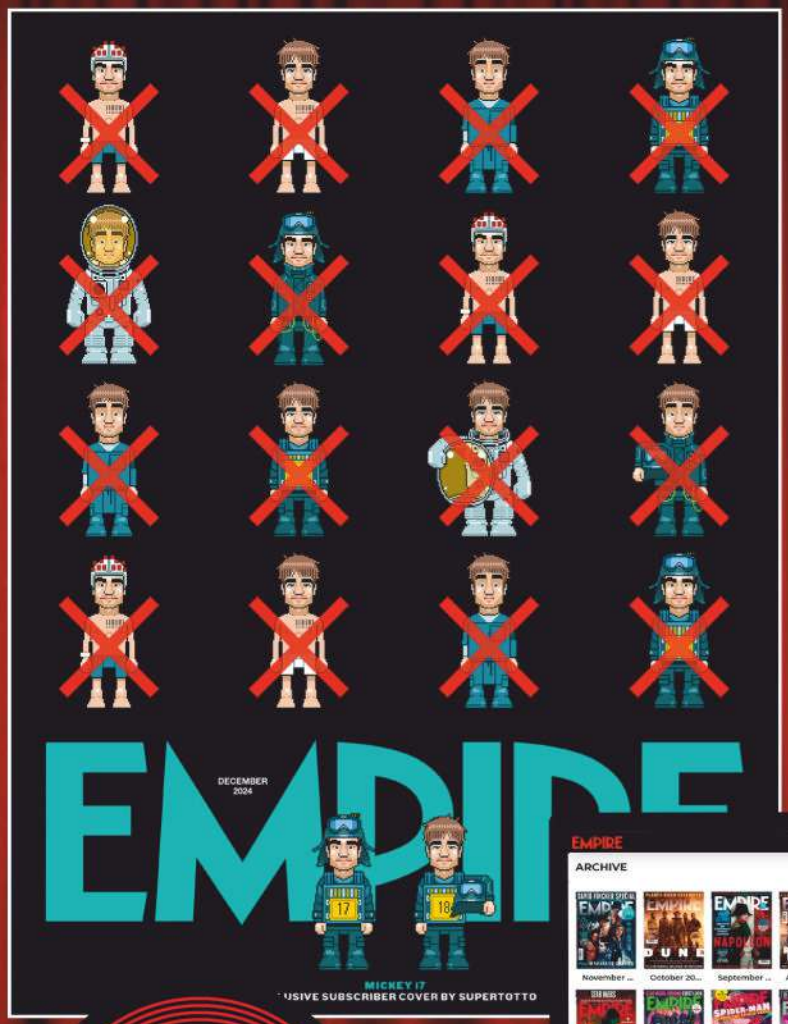

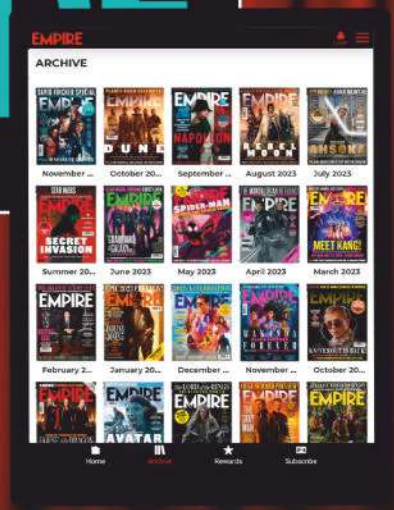

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

JANUARY 2025 | EDITED BY **BETH WEBB**

The year of the scream queen

EMPIRE SPEAKS WITH THE ACTORS BEHIND A POWERFUL, PROGRESSIVE MOMENT FOR WOMEN IN HORROR

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

MARTA KOCHANEK

A POP STAR HUNTED by a smiling demon. A decaying, middle-aged fitness celebrity battling a version of her younger self. A mysterious woman with a shot-off ear. A clairvoyant FBI agent. Horror has always created unique opportunities for actresses to craft boundary-breaking performances, from Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie Strode to Mia Goth as Pearl. Yet over the past 12 months, the genre has delivered an especially consistent, exceptional showcase of female versatility.

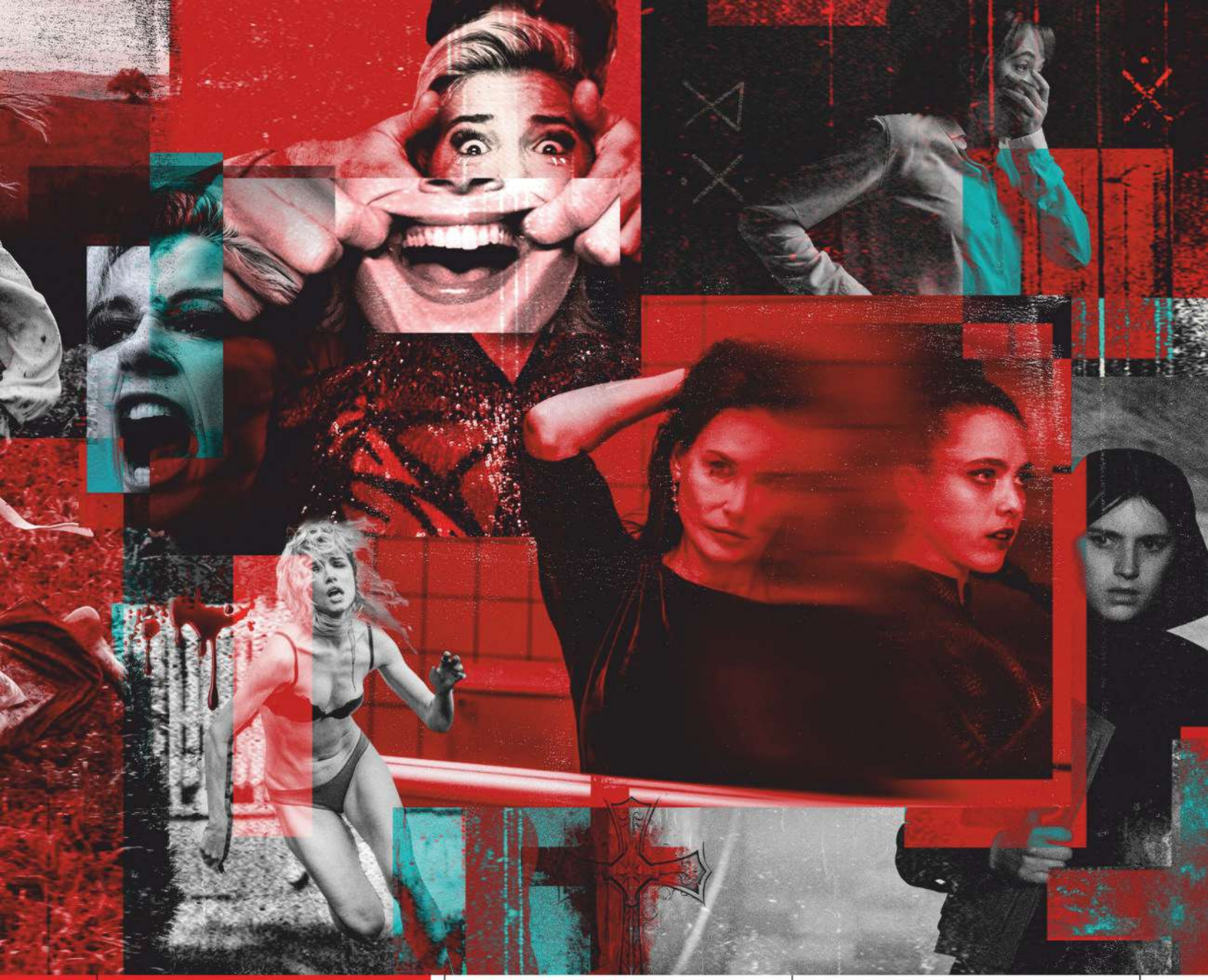
Not only has it translated into box-office success — psychological chiller *Longlegs* made $109 million on a budget of under $10 million — but, in the case of warped body horror *The Substance*, which has been submitted for Best Motion Picture — Musical Or Comedy for next year's Golden Globes, awards buzz, too. "I'm just so thrilled that people are watching the movie at all," the film's star Margaret Qualley tells *Empire* on Halloween, having by happenstance booked tickets to a post-interview matinée of *Smile 2*. "It's all just fucking icing on the cake from this point on. I'm just happy that people care."

Simply put, 2024 is the year of the scream queen. "It makes me very happy because I've been doing this for a long time, and I think that people are really seeing the genre in a new light," says *Longlegs* star Maika Monroe. "I really do think some of the best female roles are in this genre space."

Longlegs is a prime example of the belting year that horror has experienced, period. When we speak with Monroe it's also during Halloween week, and she's been admiring people's costumes inspired by the film. "There's one kid — they must have been eight or nine years old — that was dressed up as Longlegs. I was like, 'This is incredible.'" But while the film is named after Nicolas Cage's sheet-white, Satan-worshipping killer, it's tethered to Monroe's FBI agent Lee, whose traumatic past is linked to a series of horrifying murders in her native Oregon. "Is it scary being a lady FBI agent?" a little girl asks Lee. "Yes," is the instant answer.

As Monroe says, she's no stranger to horror, with a meaty CV including *It Follows* and *The Guest*. But upon reading Osgood Perkins' script for *Longlegs*, she felt an instant connection with Lee and fought for the role after an unsuccessful first meeting. "I hadn't seen this sort of lead female character portrayed in this sort of way. She goes through life incredibly differently," she says of her introverted, clairvoyant character, adding: "I hadn't felt that strongly in a long time for a project."

The reality-bending nature of horror has made for a myriad of complicated, multifaceted roles for women. In what other genre would you find Lupita Nyong'o playing a cancer patient grappling with her illness while trying to survive



Left: Naomi Ackie and Adria Arjona in *Blink Twice*.
Below left: Lupita Nyong'o, as Samira, gets the fear in *A Quiet Place: Day One*.

a creature invasion, as she does in *A Quiet Place: Day One*? *Smile 2* star Naomi Scott was required to not only deliver the polished moves and vocals of a globally adored pop star, but also tap into the mindset of a recovering addict terrorised by a suicide-fuelled parasite. Scott — best known for her roles in reboots of *Aladdin* and *Charlie's Angels* — relished the range that her character, Skye Riley, afforded her. "I think what's so good about horror is that it allows you to run the gambit as an actor from something more quiet and subtle into something incredibly extreme in terms of emotion," she explains. The key for her was tapping into the feeling of being vulnerable but being afraid to show it. "I do that all the time, right?" she says. "So times that by a hundred in terms of how you're perceived, and people projecting things onto you [when] they don't know you."

The playground that horror provided was certainly a big draw for Demi Moore. Her gore-soaked comeback in *The Substance* as Elisabeth Sparkle, an ageing celebrity who has Sue, a younger version of herself, regularly burst out of her back to take over her life, has been met with worldwide acclaim and predictions of awards recognition for her performance. "I feel like that was another added layer to it — that this is an area I haven't explored," she tells *Empire* about her gutsy, bare-all venture into the genre. "That's what keeps life interesting; being able to keep going to places that you haven't quite gone to. I feel like I'm also meeting audiences that I've not really connected with before, who are so all-in for the body horror. I didn't even know they existed! And now I'm super-excited to be connecting. I've been in awe of the response."

Qualley, who plays Sue, attributes the film's success and cultural impact to Moore. "She just eats it up in this role," the actor enthuses. "She's one of those people who's easy to relate to and have compassion for."

So why now? Willa Fitzgerald, breakout star of grisly two-hander *Strange Darling*, doesn't think it's a coincidence that this powerhouse ›

Clockwise from here: Demi Moore in *The Substance*; Sydney Sweeney's Sister Cecilia has a bloody time in *Immaculate*; Margaret Qualley as *The Substance*'s Sue; A hard stare from Nell Tiger Free in *The First Omen*; Willa Fitzgerald's The Lady in *Strange Darling*.

assortment of female characters has emerged during this particular political climate. "I think we're at a moment in time right now where women's rights and bodies are on the line in a way that's incredibly visible — in America in particular — that has not been that visible for decades," she explains. For her, horror has always been an ideal genre for exploring societal fears. "We're at a reckoning point where we're coming out of this 'Boss Babe' era and into something that feels very scary and unknown and time-sensitive, and I think that's in people's psyches."

It seems no coincidence that in the throes of Roe v. Wade being overturned, not one but two films about nuns impregnated by evil forces — *Immaculate* and *The First Omen* — hit cinemas. Zoë Kravitz began writing a different version of her directorial debut *Blink Twice* in 2017, but updated it amid #MeToo into a story about Naomi Ackie's cocktail waitress bravely taking on an island of sexual predators. And *The Substance* arrives at a time when societal pressures on body image have become even more exacerbated by social media. "The film is tackling subjects that unfortunately everyone has to deal with to some degree in their own life," says Qualley. "But it's doing it in this way that's flashy and silly and fun.'"

Of course, to bring those fears to life took immense physical work as well. Fitzgerald, for instance, spends a sizable chunk of the film running through rural Oregon, her character missing an ear. "It was exhausting, sometimes scary, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes really fun — but it was always really comfortable, actually," she remembers. It was on those intense days of shooting, where *The Lady* is devoid of dialogue, that she connected the most with her character. "I feel like these private moments where we get to just be with her are also the moments in which the audience gets to see her for her," she explains. Scott shares a similar sentiment from her time playing Skye. She recalls shooting a scene among all the killings and screaming where her character — in survival mode — desperately reaches out to a friend that she mistreated as an addict. It was a moment where Scott got to show Skye flaws and all: the not-so-perfect victim: "I got to play a human, and I was just so excited."

As the flawless, unrelatable Sue, Qualley faced a different challenge. It's only, strangely, as her character mutates into a walking flesh puddle with bonus limbs that she really becomes more accessible. "I think [as the] monster is when she really recognises empathy

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

FAIRYTALE IN NEW YORK

Ke Huy Quan will lead a new man-on-a-mission action-thriller from *Sisu* director Jalmari Helander. Set over the festive season, the film will see Quan play a New York cabbie trying to retrieve his estranged son's stolen Christmas present after a gang run-in.

ASSASSINATION

Jessica Chastain has boarded Barry Levinson's new, true-story-inspired JFK conspiracy thriller with Al Pacino. Co-written by Levinson, the film centres around crime reporter Dorothy Kilgallen's (Chastain) attempts to catch Kennedy's "real" killer. Shooting starts in Boston early next year.

UNTITLED JACK RYAN MOVIE

John Krasinski has announced that he will reprise his role as the heroic former Marine from the Prime Video series for a feature-length adventure. The Amazon MGM movie will be helmed by Season 2 co-director Andrew Bernstein.

for the first time," she laughs. As someone who enjoys the physicality of her roles (Qualley is a trained dancer, having studied in her teens), she was looking forward to the scenes that involved heavy make-up and effects. "The reality was really hard to be honest," she admits. "The prosthetics were so intense and pretty claustrophobic and somewhat painful, but at the same time, from an acting point of view it was rewarding."

You can see why, despite the emotional and bodily hurdles these actors have overcome for these films, they can't keep away from horror movies. Qualley was recently cast as the lead in the 1858-set *Victorian Psycho*, in which she'll play a governess who must suppress her psychopathic tendencies while teaching children. "I like the genre a lot. I think the most interesting characters live within that world and I'm excited to give it another go," she says.

Meanwhile, Monroe will be reprising one of her many Final Girls for the first time, as *They Follow* looks set to begin filming next year. The actor admits that she feels some pressure given how strongly people connected to the original film, in which she plays Jay, a university student who becomes hunted by a violent, sexually transmitted entity. "I think it's going to be a little scary, a little weird, but really quite cool," she says excitedly. "The movie will take place pretty much [the same amount of time on as] I've been away from this character, so it's interesting to think about everything that I've gone through in my life and what ten years means to a person."

It seems, then, that 2024 was not a flash in the pan for these actors. A new era for the scream queen begins here.

SEE YOU WHEN I SEE YOU

Kaitlyn Dever joins David Duchovny in the first feature directed by Jay Duplass in over a decade. The family drama, loosely adapted by comedian Adam Cayton-Holland from his own memoir, will explore grief and healing, with production currently underway in Atlanta.

ALPHA GANG

Dave Bautista, Channing Tatum, Cate Blanchett, Léa Seydoux, Steven Yeun, Riley Keough, and Zoë Kravitz have signed up for *Sunset Sasquatch* directors the Zellner Brothers' latest. An alien-invasion comedy boasting leather-clad biker extraterrestrials, the Zellners' zany feature is circling a spring 2025 shoot.

PAINTER

Amber Midthunder and Alan Ritchson will spearhead an original actioner from writer Derek Kolstad (*John Wick*) and stunt veteran-turned-director Garrett Warren. A sort-of-inverse *Taken*, the movie centres around a young-woman-with-a-very-particular-set-of-skills' efforts to rescue her kidnapped father.

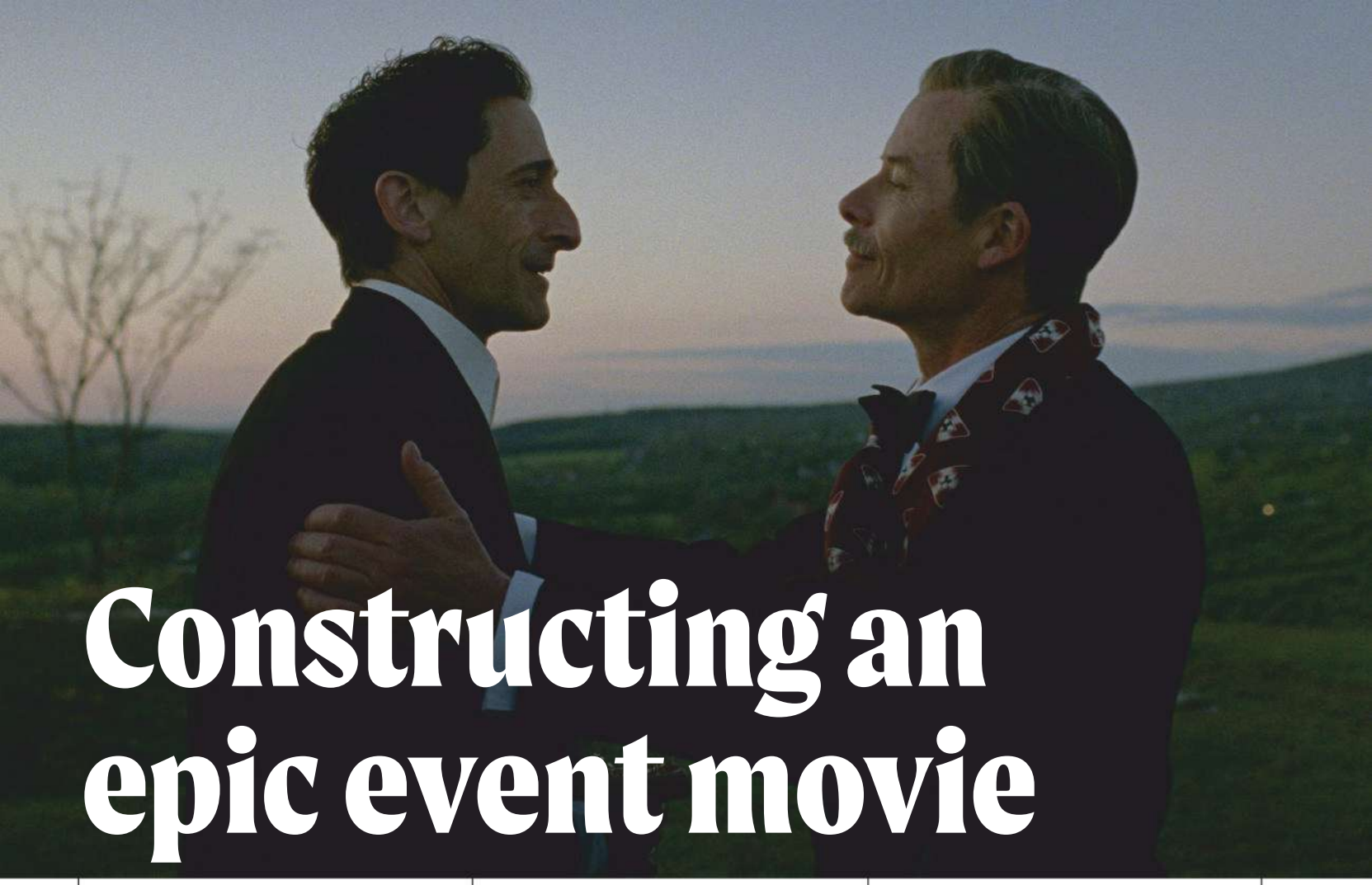
UNTITLED BLUE STREAK SEQUEL

Following *Bad Boys: Ride Or Die*'s box-office boom earlier this year, **Martin Lawrence** is working with Sony to revive his other big, late-'90s, law-enforcement-adjacent buddy comedy. The proposed sequel, written by *Tropic Thunder* scribe Cole Maliska, is currently in early development.

THE GALLERIST

Natalie Portman and **Jenna Ortega** are in the frame to lead *Birds Of Prey* filmmaker Cathy Yan's next feature. Co-written by Yan with James Pedersen, the film centres around a gallerist (who'd have thunk?) who conspires to sell a dead man at Art Basel Miami.

Alamy, Imago



Constructing an epic event movie

BRADY CORBET ON THE BRUTALIST, AN ARCHITECTURAL THRILLER CAUSING A STIR

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

AT THE FIRST press conference for *The Brutalist*, at the Venice Film Festival, director Brady Corbet started to well up. "I'm very emotional today," he explained, "because we've been working on it for seven years. And it felt urgent every day."

In almost every sense, *The Brutalist* is a monumental film. It's a sweeping epic about a Hungarian Brutalist architect (played by Adrien Brody) who escapes the Holocaust to forge a new life in America, where he meets a wealthy benefactor (played by Guy Pearce). It's also been nearly a decade in the making, shot on 35mm cameras, with a runtime so long (215 minutes) it demands a 15-minute intermission. And it has a story spanning multiple continents, decades and languages. You can understand why the man behind it felt overwhelmed. Now, speaking with *Empire*, Corbet says he is "starting to feel like a human being again". The film has been "an obsession for so many years", he says. "To finally be unburdened [by] that obsession — it's an extraordinary feeling."

This is a film with a lot on its mind. Brody's character, László Tóth, is fictional, but his ideas are rooted in history. "For me, a narrative about a day in the life of a character is not enough," Corbet explains. "I need things to really be about an entire period of history. I need them to be not just about the world, but about the universe." So *The Brutalist* deals with the trauma of World War II, telling an immigrant's story, how it intersects with their art, the corrupting force of capitalism, and the American dream. No small feat.

But it seems to have worked. The filmmaker, whose last feature was musical drama *Vox Lux*, has been surprised by the near-universally positive reaction — which included a 12-minute standing ovation at its premiere, rave reviews, and Oscar buzz. "I always assume that anything that I ever make is going to be quite divisive," he says. "We sort of expected the reception to be more like [notorious flop] *Heaven's Gate*." He chuckles. "This film was about subverting American myth-making, and the tradition of the American classic. It's funny for the film to be received by certain viewers as an American classic, because that's exactly what we were supposed to be the antidote for."

Corbet is thrilled that his three-and-a-half-hour architecture movie is finding an enthusiastic audience, however. At a recent preview screening in LA, people were "standing in line for literally 12 hours", Corbet reports. "It's one thing for a film like this to be met with the critical reception it's been met with, but for audiences to be standing in line for hours — that gives me a lot of hope for the future." He compares its success to Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*. "So many people want to see a movie about adults, made by adults, for adults. Over and over again, it seems people are showing up for original films." Like his fictional hero, Brady Corbet could be making history.

Top to bottom: László Tóth (Adrien Brody) and Harrison Lee Van Buren Sr (Guy Pearce); Tóth and Lee Van Buren Sr with Gordon (Isaach De Bankolé); Felicity Jones plays Tóth's wife Erzsébet. **Below left:** Writer-director Brady Corbet.

***THE BRUTALIST* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 24 JANUARY**

@fizzysodatoes, Imago, Julia Smerling, Universal

THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'HAPPY'
PHARRELL WILLIAMS

PIECE BY PIECE

The multifaceted musician's popular earworm gets prime placement as he takes a winning victory lap in his LEGO documentary. The feel-good vibes it exudes are still clap-worthy.

'POSTLUDE OF CONCLAVE'
VOLKER BERTELMANN

CONCLAVE

Bertelmann's swirling, slashing strings are a gorgeous listen both in and out of context, and they give this riveting papal drama an added air of mystery.

'WINTER COAT'
SAOIRSE RONAN

BLITZ

Saoirse Ronan adds songstress to her vast repertoire with this ballad. Her soothing voice is a balm in Steve McQueen's frequently harrowing World War II drama.

'STRENGTH AND HONOR'
HARRY GREGSON-WILLIAMS

GLADIATOR II

Gregson-Williams gives this track a patient build-up before recalling one of Hans Zimmer's best *Gladiator* themes in jubilant fashion, with a powerful choir and Lisa Gerrard's vocals adding ballast.

'MY STRANGER'
MELISSA BARRERA

YOUR MONSTER

This *Beauty And The Beast*-inspired musical-horror-romcom is bolstered by Barrera's elastic vocals. They carry this Broadway-style love song, which she infuses with a fitting passion.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE

CLONES AND ALL

INSIDE THE TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET LOOKALIKE CONTEST THAT THE REAL DEAL COULDN'T RESIST

A GAG GONE WILD

It was in late September that mysterious flyers for a Timothée Chalamet lookalike contest started to appear across New York, offering a $50 prize for the winner. The event was orchestrated by Anthony Potero — known as Anthony Po — a YouTuber known for hosting headline-grabbing stunts such as eating an entire jar of pickles in a cape and balaclava. The lookalike contest was part of a gag.

"My producer always says I look like him, so we were trying to find a doppelgänger of me as a joke," the 23-year-old tells *Empire*. Yet the competition caught on by word-of-mouth, not least due to a photo taken of Chalamet spotting a flyer while shooting his upcoming movie *Marty Supreme* in Manhattan. "I laughed pretty hard," Potero says of clocking the snap.

A SURPRISE CAMEO

Nearly 2,000 young people attended the contest in Washington Square Park at 1pm on 28 October. Participants dressed up as various iterations of the actor, ranging from his movie characters to red-carpet looks. Due to Potero not having a permit for the event, police showed up within 12 minutes to shut it down. Luckily it was also around that time that someone else made a surprise appearance: Chalamet himself. "I would have placed money on him not coming because it's incredibly unsafe," says Potero. "There's not a single worse place for him to be at 1pm on a Sunday."

Yet the star — disguised by a mask and cap — sidled up to a few lookalikes and revealed himself with a simple, "Hey man, what's up?" — posing for photos before swiftly leaving. "I'm happy he came, I hope he had fun," Potero says.

Top to bottom: Timothée Chalamet himself makes a surprise appearance; The winner: Miles Mitchell; YouTube host Anthony Po emcees.

THE GOLDEN TICKET

A panel of influencers decided upon the winner: 21-year-old Miles Mitchell, who came dressed as Willy Wonka and received a giant cheque for $50, plus a trophy. "I liked second place more," says Potero about a runner-up who came in a *Dune* outfit. "At least, he looked more like Timothée. But first place had a great personality." Despite receiving a $500 fine for not securing a permit, he's not been deterred from planning more unauthorised events. But Potero isn't interested in a 2025 Chalamet lookalike follow-up event, even with the success of the original one. "If you were to compare what I do to a painter, would a painter paint the same thing twice?" he offers. It seems this YouTube Rembrandt is happy with a one-and-*Dune* approach. **BETH WEBB**

On A Role

JOHN LITHGOW IS CARDINAL TREMBLAY

THE ACTOR PLAYS AN AMBITIOUS CLERIC ASPIRING TO BE TOP OF THE POPES IN CONCLAVE

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE MINDSET

Lithgow was initially sceptical about playing Cardinal Tremblay, one of the frontrunners to become the new Pope in Edward Berger's thriller *Conclave*. "I didn't really know what I was being offered," he says. "I launched into this screenplay thinking, 'Is this really something I want to do? A Vatican clerical drama?' But it was irresistible." Part of the draw was playing the enigmatic, colourful Canadian bishop, who locks horns with Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes), the Brit presiding over the voting. "Tremblay is very much an administrator," Lithgow says. "He's the one who knows the spreadsheets, pays the bills and even signs off on the menus. He's one of the people who makes everything work

Top to bottom: Cardinal Tremblay (John Lithgow, centre) has thoughts; The Sistine Chapel reconstructed; Tremblay wants to make the Vatican great again.

— sometimes you have to be slightly suspicious of those." A cardinal sinner, perhaps?

THE RESEARCH

Having never read Robert Harris' source novel, Lithgow immersed himself in the College Of Cardinals, was advised on Catholic rites by religious advisors Francesco Bonomo and Elio Lops, then schooled in Latin by dialogue coach Tabata Marinucci Majocchi. "I had taken Latin years and years ago, but I was relying on the fact that the man was Canadian," he says. "[Co-star] Ralph Fiennes set a very high bar for us all, wandering from Italian to Latin to English effortlessly. He shamed us all into doing a very good job."

THE LOOK

Rather than wear off-the-peg cardinal clobber, Lithgow donned bespoke heavy robes created by costume designer Lisy Christl. For Tremblay, the cassocks were more flamboyant because "he has a little bit more vanity", suggests Lithgow. "We each had our own marvellous pendant with its own iconography, which they had specially made for us. That's so flattering to our actorly egos. Mine was just slightly more pretentious." Despite wearing an ever-present *zucchetto* (a red cap), Lithgow also sported a hair-piece to give Tremblay a "little pompadour that I spent a good deal of time adjusting to get right — just as I suspect Tremblay did."

THE ETERNAL CITY

Conclave represents the third time Lithgow has shot in Italy, following Brian De Palma's *Obsession* and Renny Harlin's *Cliffhanger*. With the production unable to shoot in the actual Vatican, the Sistine Chapel (where the conclave takes place) was recreated in Fellini's old stomping ground, Cinecittà Studios. Lithgow spent hours shooting the scenes of the cardinals voting, hiding his book, iPhone and iPad under the tablecloth.

"Stanley Tucci [Cardinal Bellini] was right across the nave and that son of a bitch taught me the *New York Times* Spelling Bee game — that has basically ruined the rest of my life," Lithgow laughs. "I can't get through a single day without proving to myself that I'm a genius, and that takes an hour minimum of totally wasted time." When in Rome...

***CONCLAVE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 29 NOVEMBER**

Alamy, Cinecittà Studios, Imago, Shutterstock, Universal. Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

TO CARJACK OR NOT TO CARJACK

THE FILMMAKERS BEHIND GRAND THEFT HAMLET ON BRINGING SHAKESPEARE TO SAN ANDREAS

OF ALL THE things that can go wrong during a live production of *Hamlet* — forgetting lines, a phone going off in the audience — falling off a giant blimp doesn't seem like it would be top of the list. But then, most live productions of *Hamlet* don't take place within Los Santos, a fictional city in *Grand Theft Auto Online*.

The idea came to partners Pinny Grylls (a filmmaker) and Sam Crane (an actor) during lockdown. They noticed their 12-year-old kid playing the game with his friends and having a great time. "I didn't really get online gaming and what it could offer to people, and it just suddenly sparked something," Crane explains. They dug deeper and found live-streamed performances of fictional narratives happening in the world of *Minecraft*. "It was the liveness of theatre that [we] missed, and it was like, 'What can we do?'" Grylls remembers.

What they did was make a documentary completely within the world of *Grand Theft Auto* on the planning and execution of a performance of *Hamlet*, a play chosen because of its shared themes with the game ("Revenge, power, and pretending to be other people," Crane lists off). Initially it was just Sam and his fellow actor friend Mark Oosterveen on board, with Grylls recording some of their journey — from its genesis to the performance itself — for the documentary via an iPhone that her avatar owned. "You can create close-ups and have your own cinematic language then," she explains. After deciding on the play, they found an open-air theatre in the game and held auditions, both with friends from the real world and strangers in the virtual one (one user spontaneously, movingly recited from the Quran while his avatar was dressed as a lizard man).

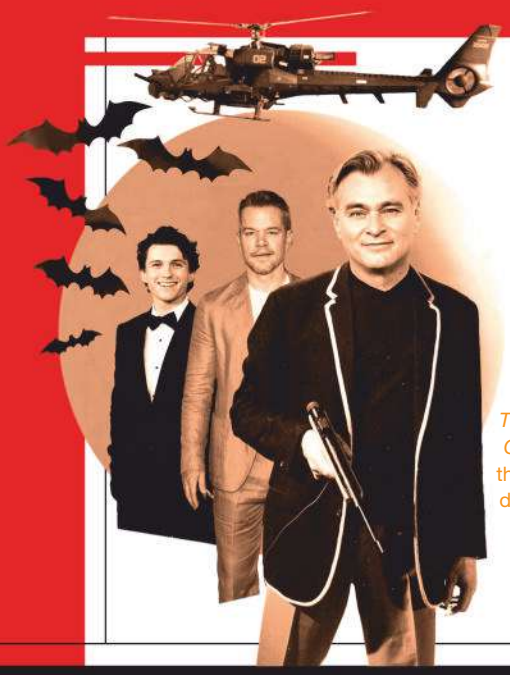
Of course, the high concept came with its challenges. The open-world element meant strangers could wreak havoc on the group, or a police raid could scupper rehearsals. Crane, however, finds *GTA*'s unpredictability appealing, and the perfect forum for a live performance. "You're trying to do the speech, and at any moment a wild cat could come and eat you, or someone could fly in with a bazooka and blow you up," he enthuses. "It's thrilling and it keeps you on the edge of your seat."

When it came to the main event, due to server restrictions only around 40 people watched the performance live at the time, with 6,000 watching a YouTube stream that was available for a short time afterwards. Now, with schools and universities reaching out to watch it among many other new fans, the pair are looking to make it universally available while also hoping to do more *GTA* plays at some point in the future. Bazookas and blimps at the ready.

BETH WEBB

Clockwise from top: Bringing the Bard to the most violent of worlds; Three actors taking part; Goodnight, sweet prince?

***GRAND THEFT HAMLET* WILL BE IN CINEMAS FROM 6 DECEMBER**



WHAT'S NEXT FOR NOLAN?

WE SIFT THROUGH THE MANY RUMOURS ABOUT THE *OPPENHEIMER* DIRECTOR'S NEXT FILM

IS IT... ANOTHER BIOPIC?

Christopher Nolan abandoned a Howard Hughes biopic when he discovered Martin Scorsese was making *The Aviator*. But following *Oppenheimer*'s success, there are whispers he may dust off that two-decade-old project, which he has previously called "the best script I've ever written."

IS IT... A VAMPIRE MOVIE?

Neither Nolan, nor his new film's two confirmed stars, Matt Damon and Tom Holland, have ever made a full-on horror movie. So rumours that a 1920s-set vampire film may be on the cards are tantalising indeed. *Tenet*-style inverted silver bullets, anyone? We could certainly sink our teeth into that.

IS IT... A SPY MOVIE?

Nolan was once attached to remake twisty '60s TV show *The Prisoner*, and there are murmurs that the project may have resurfaced. It would mean Damon returning to the spy genre, although if the original *The Prisoner* is anything to go by, it will feature *far* fewer motorbike chases than *Bourne*.

IS IT... A HELICOPTER MOVIE?

Reddit-originated hearsay claims Nolan's next movie is inspired by 1983 actioner *Blue Thunder*, and will see terrorists pursuing a super-advanced futuristic helicopter. For our money, this one sounds the most exciting of the lot. Mr Nolan, please — get to the chopper!

TOM ELLEN

How do you crack a character like Maria?

ANGELINA JOLIE AND PABLO LARRAÍN ON BRINGING A MUSICAL ICON TO THE SCREEN

WORDS **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

IF THERE WAS anyone who could play Maria Callas — the Greek opera star whose life, work and loves were splashed everywhere in her era — it was Angelina Jolie. After a hiatus following 2021's *Eternals*, Jolie returns amid Oscar buzz for the role under the direction of Pablo Larraín, whose fascination with the private lives of glamorous women has previously resulted in biopics *Jackie* and *Spencer*. Set in the late '70s, the film follows Callas' final days as she reflects on her grand yet troubled life. *Empire* sat down with the star and filmmaker to hear how they made an icon sing.

What brought you together for this story?
Angelina Jolie: I love Pablo's work, and I asked many years ago if we could work together.
Pablo Larraín: Yes, we met twice — I went to Angelina's house and we would discuss ideas. We got to know each other. But none of those ideas ever got anywhere until this one.
Jolie: Wanting to work with Pablo and knowing this was important to him, and that he understood Maria, was the beginning for me. Knowing this was about a life and an art form — you don't often see that in a film. It was new and challenging.

Angelina, you sing as part of the performance. Did training for that element of the role give you a new appreciation for opera?
Jolie: I am now a huge fan of opera — I listen to it more than most other kinds of music. I started singing classes and Italian classes, but when I switched to opera classes it was a whole other universe, and it required something very different. The first time I really sang, for the first few classes, I nearly passed out every time. I couldn't quite get my breathwork. I think that's why it takes a lifetime of training to really do it.

Clockwise from main: Maria Callas (Angelina Jolie) relaxing in her crocheted cardie; Jolie and director Pablo Larraín (centre) on set; Thrilling her fans; Becoming the superstar.

The film looks back from a late vantage point in Maria's life. Why was that an important storytelling choice?
Larraín: There's a point when you're ready to stop thinking about the future. And that might be when you think that death is around the corner, when tragedies that you played on stage become part of your life, in the case of Maria. That's what we're aiming to do in this film, where she says, "I'm not going to care about anyone else anymore. I'm going to care about myself, and by doing so, I'm going to start to understand how I got here."
Jolie: Something really cool about the film is that if you don't know opera, you can go through the entire journey of the film and understand it. If you *do* know opera, you understand why certain pieces of music and certain arias come at certain times. It adds many extra layers. That's an artist's life, to say, "What were all these different worlds that I walked in, and how did these worlds colour my life and change my perception?"

Callas was known for being very glamorous. How do costumes play a part in the film?
Jolie: What's interesting to me is that there was this public Maria who was a very stylish woman of her time. It's some of the best fashion you've seen. But for me the balance of that was at home, in her robe and her glasses. There's this hand-knitted robe that was crocheted in Italy. I felt that taste of this Greek woman, who had this earthy quality to her at home in her fifties. She was stripped down there. That was her loving who she is.
Larraín: Her dressing room in the film is a place of protection. She shields from the world with all of her things. That's her safe haven.

How does this film address fame?
Larraín: Fame is just another emotion or another problem along with love, passion, betrayal and work. These trials are not reserved for someone like Maria. Every single soul who has felt betrayed goes through this process, so it's not unique.
Jolie: Probably in ways that I don't think about. I was more focused on the fact that she was an artist. I think people from the outside have their own perceptions of fame and the media that make it more significant to my life than it is, but in your work as an artist that is not so significant.

MARIA IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 JANUARY

THE PLATFORM

"Who knows, perhaps Art The Clown will try a musical too"

© Rob Baker Ashton

CATHERINE BRAY ON *TERRIFIER 3*'S SURPRISE TRIUMPH OVER *JOKER: FOLIE À DEUX*

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED to be like this. In the clown-versus-clown cinematic showdown of *Joker: Folie À Deux* and *Terrifier 3*, the proof was all but there in the giant custard-pie pudding. In one corner: Todd Phillips' follow-up to his R-rated, billion-dollar box-office smash, which earned its star Joaquin Phoenix an Oscar. In the other, the Christmas-set third instalment of Damien Leone's low-budget *Terrifier* franchise, which follows demonic serial killer Art The Clown's violent rampage.

And yet, at the time of writing this, *Folie À Deux*'s clown with the upside-down frown is struggling to turn a profit for studio Warner Bros. Meanwhile, *Terrifier 3* — the blood-drenched David to DC's Goliath — has so far grossed around $50 million worldwide on a budget of just $2 million, much of which was spent on practical gore effects.

How on earth did this happen? When film fans and industry folk alike looked into their crystal balls in January, 2024 looked set to be the year of The Joker. Sure, the film had big shoes to fill, but Phillips and WB were committed to bringing a new chapter to fans in a way that felt fresh — hence the slowed-down musical numbers and introduction of one Lady Gaga as a toe-tapping Harley Quinn. Here is where box-office analysts believe that *Folie À Deux* hit a bum note: by alienating DC fans with its new fantasy musical approach. "The filmmakers deserve credit for making more unconventional creative choices in '*Folie*', adding the romantic angle with Lady Gaga. But this time nothing worked," one expert told *Variety*.

To add insult to injury, *Terrifier 3* was the clown movie whose gigantic runaway success few saw coming. Few people in the industry, that is: the fans could have told you. The first two films had exceeded expectations too, each time taking a seismic leap in ambition and viscera. We can't get enough of Art's mischievous escapades, whether he's using liquid nitrogen and a hammer to take apart a man dressed as Santa Claus bit by bit, or engineering death by pick-up truck.

And the films only grew by word-of-mouth, with reports of walkouts within the opening minutes of the third film (plus rumours of vomiting) fanning curiosity. Such has been the response to *Terrifier 3* that Leone is openly plotting two sequels, begging the question of just how much further he can push Art and his entrails-strewn mission. Who knows, perhaps he'll try a musical too? If anyone can make money from a clown belting out showtunes as he butchers the innocent, it's Leone.

The Spotlight

Malachi Kirby

AS THE STAR OF *A THOUSAND BLOWS*, THE BRITISH ACTOR CONTINUES TO TAKE BIG SWINGS

WORDS **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

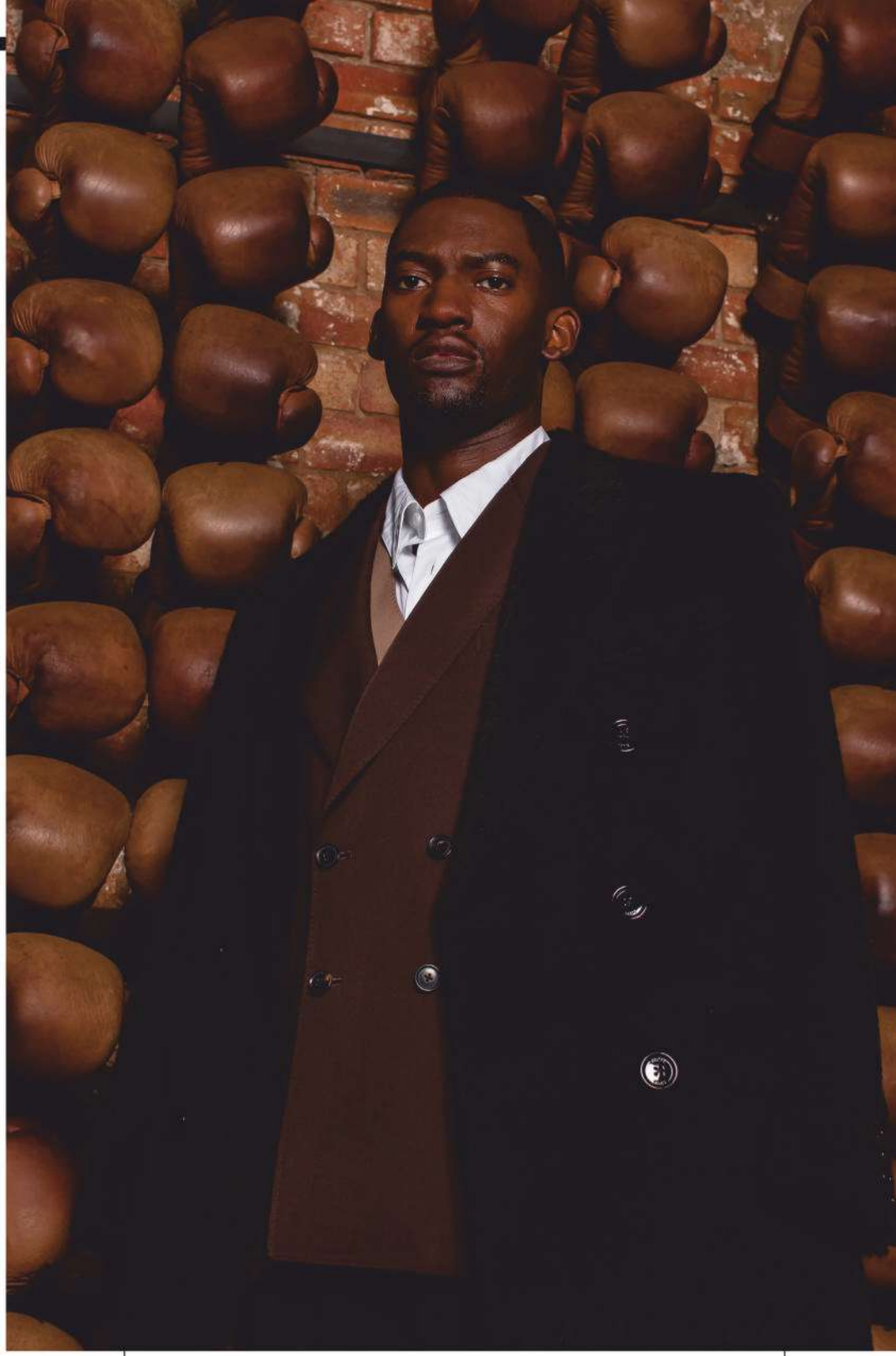
OLLIE ADEGBOYE

MALACHI KIRBY IS the kind of actor who would rather tell you about his mum than about his BAFTA. After winning Best Supporting Actor at the 2020 TV awards for portraying real-life activist Darcus Howe in *Mangrove* — one instalment of Steve McQueen's acclaimed anthology *Small Axe* — Kirby could practically touch the sky. The London-born actor, who has appeared in landmark British television from *EastEnders* to *Black Mirror* to his latest — *A Thousand Blows*, a historical boxing series from Steven Knight — has built an impressive résumé. But even as he works with the very best, he counts his mum as number one. "It was just me and her," he tells *Empire*. "We lived on a council estate; most of our food came out of a tin. But she made me feel like we were so rich. I just grew up believing anything was possible."

Performing wasn't Kirby's original choice of career; his dream was to be a novelist. "I always say I'm not really an actor; it's something that I do, but it's not who I am," he admits. Still, the bug bit him in year nine while on a course at Battersea Arts Centre near where he grew up, so he moved on to South London's Identity School Of Acting.

The actor cut his teeth on the stage, and he describes his transition into television and film as initially nerve-racking. "I was really introverted, and I didn't like cameras in my face, honestly," he reflects. "I felt more safe on the stage. But I've learned to have more of an appreciation for the relationship with the camera." That confidence was bolstered by his collaboration with McQueen in 2019: "I thought on set he would be very controlled, but he gave me the most creative licence [that] I think I've ever had."

For his role as Hezekiah Moscow, the hero of *A Thousand Blows*, Kirby plays another real



Above and right: Malachi Kirby, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in London on 29 October 2024. **Far right:** As boxer Hezekiah Moscow in *A Thousand Blows*.

BETWEEN SCENES

OUR SPOTLIGHT STAR'S FAVOURITE STUFF

THE SHOW

GANGS OF LONDON

"I just watched both seasons — I know I'm late to the party, but that show took me on a rollercoaster and was extremely hard to switch off. Sope Dirisu was a revelation; I think he's one of the best actors around right now."

THE ALBUM

***BEING POOR IS EXPENSIVE* BY BASHY**

"There are not many albums I've come across in my lifetime that I put on back-to-back repeat. And not just some songs — the whole album. I love it so much that I got the vinyl. Banger."

THE ARTWORK

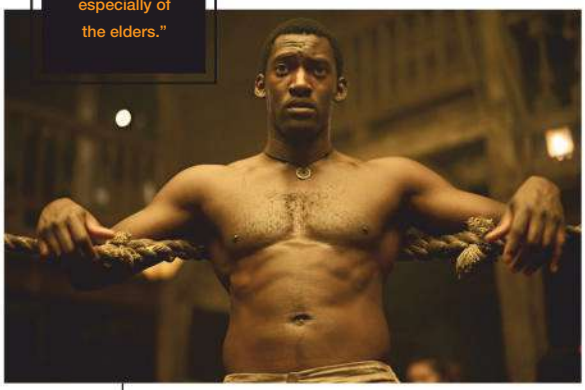
***TIME AND SILENCE* BY CAROLINE HALLEY DES FONTAINES**

"I was recently at a press junket and saw this book by [her]. There was a photograph of a face on the front cover that I couldn't take my eyes off. I find faces and the stories they tell so interesting, especially of the elders."

historical figure: a newcomer in Victorian London-turned-bare-knuckle fighter. "I want to play characters who actually existed," Kirby enthuses. "I enjoy needing to do research and wanting to honour someone in that way. There's an energy to tap into. I had never boxed in my life, and I didn't realise how much of the sport is psychological." The series is set in the 1800s, when many Black people were in servitude or enslaved. Moscow, however, was free, and wanted to be a lion-tamer and fighter. "He needed to protect his dream," Kirby adds. He does that protecting from his onscreen nemesis, played by Stephen Graham, an actor Kirby also starred alongside in the tense 2021 kitchen drama *Boiling Point*. "There's something about him as an actor that demands the truth out of you," Kirby summarises of his co-star.

The actor's ongoing small-screen journey will see him play two brothers as the dual leading roles in *Anansi Boys*, Prime Video's large-scale adaptation of Neil Gaiman's epic fantasy novel. And despite his burgeoning acting career, he's committed to writing his own work for both stage and screen as well. "I've always wanted to create words that I couldn't actually experience in real life. They have an element of fantasy to them," he says, with a hint of shyness. Malachi Kirby might be soft-spoken, but then, the work speaks pretty loudly for itself. And hopefully makes his mum proud.

***A THOUSAND BLOWS* IS ON DISNEY+ AND HULU FROM EARLY 2025**



Styling: Jason Rembert. Styling assistant: Mariamu Fundi. Grooming: Nadia Altinbas. Photographer's assistant: Aaron Watson-McNab. Main image: Dark brown blazer, waistcoat and trousers: Paul Smith; Shirt and coat: Celine. Inset: Waistcoat and trousers: Paul Smith; Shirt: Celine. Additional imagery: Alamy, Marvel, Sony

ARE THE SINISTER SIX READY TO STRIKE?

RUMOURS OF A SPIDEY SUPERVILLAIN TEAM-UP ARE RUMBLING. BUT NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME...

2013: THE VAULT TEASE

Sony's first attempt to build a cinematic universe around Spider-Man's rogues' gallery involved *The Cabin In The Woods*' Drew Goddard, who was hired to write and direct 'The Sinister Six'. Glimpses of Doc Ock's arms, Vulture's wings, and Rhino's polymer suit in an Oscorp vault at the end of 2014's *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* followed, but when Andrew Garfield's sophomore Spidey outing tanked critically and commercially, Goddard's Sinister project ended up in limbo.

2018: THE BIRTH OF SPUMC

While Kevin Feige's 'Infinity Saga' was reaching its climax in the MCU, Sony rebooted its own cinematic-universe plans with *Venom*. The first entry in the unflatteringly titled SPUMC (that's Sony Pictures Universe of Marvel Characters), Ruben Fleischer's Tom Hardy-starrer was a major success, with the anti-hero blockbuster making over $800 million at the box office and galvanising interest anew in the possibility of a supervillain team-up. Despite momentum being on their side, however, Sony remained hesitant, and the Sinister Six remained on ice.

2022: VULTURE REAPPEARS

Following the multiversal madness of Marvel Studios' *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, hope for Sony's Sinister Six film was renewed when none other than Michael Keaton's Adrian Toomes — aka *Spider-Man: Homecoming*'s Vulture — rocked up in a post-credits sting for 2022 vampire flick *Morbius*. Now sure, the arrival of an established MCU villain in SPUMC may not have made much sense, but Vulture and Morbius' meeting brought us closer than ever before to a tangible team-up of Spider-Man's greatest enemies. With Venom already well established, three of the Six had been found.

2024: MADAME WEB, KRAVEN AND KNULL

Both Madame Web and Kraven The Hunter have entered SPUMC's supervillainous fold in 2024. And with the King in Black himself, symbiote god Knull, emerging in *Venom: The Last Dance*, Sony's cinematic universe has *finally* established its first Thanos-level threat. But in a world with no Avengers, who could possibly save the day? Well, while there may only be five of 'em currently, whispers suggest Kraven, Morbius, Madame Web, Vulture and Venom might all join forces to face Knull in — you guessed it! — 'The Sinister Six'. After years in development hell, these bad guys may still get their happily ever after.

JORDAN KING

Warriors, come out to rap

LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA AND EISA DAVIS ON THEIR MUSICAL REINVENTION OF A '70S CLASSIC

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"I SAW IT at a sleepover as a kid, and it scared the bejesus out of me," laughs Lin-Manuel Miranda. "But in a way that I *immediately* wanted to watch it again."

Miranda is discussing the 1979 thriller *The Warriors* — the blood-soaked tale of a New York gang trying to get from The Bronx to Coney Island with every other gang in the city after them. A heady tale of face paint and flick knives, the movie was pulled from cinemas after violence at screenings, but became a cult hit, its famous taunt, "Warriors, come out to plaaaaay!" quoted on hip-hop records and chanted in sports stadiums. "The film is stylised, but it's still this pure, simple story of wanting to get home," says Miranda. "A weird amount of my brain is devoted to it."

So much so that the actor/composer — best known for Broadway mega-hit *Hamilton* — has now released a concept album inspired by the film. With help from rap royalty like Nas, Lauryn Hill and the Wu-Tang Clan, the record channels the movie's grimy spirit to create something truly fresh and new. "The idea of a *Warriors* musical [was suggested to me] years ago," reveals Miranda. "But I didn't think it would work. Action movies and musicals fight for the same real estate — when the talking's done, they either go to action or music. Plus, I'd never seen a convincing fight scene on stage."

Instead of a play, he opted to create this story-driven album, setting the Warriors' quest to song, and reimagining the movie's male gang as an all-female outfit. "The [gender-flipping] carved it out as different to the film, but still a love letter to it," says Miranda. "Making them female also complicated the plot in an interesting way. How do these women use their wit and resources to survive this nightmare?"

Above: Lin-Manuel Miranda and Eisa Davis. **Left:** The Warriors on their nightmare night. We can already see them bursting into song and dance, if we're honest.

To help figure this out, Miranda enlisted writer/actor Eisa Davis as his co-creator. The pair traced the Warriors' epic journey together for real — "We made it to Coney by sunset," laughs Davis — and even met the film's director, Walter Hill. "We had wonderful conversations with Walter," Davis tells us. "It was amazing to get his blessing." They discovered Hill had initially wanted to have a gay gang in the movie, but couldn't ("for... 1979 reasons," laughs Miranda). So, their inclusion of an LGBTQ crew on the record was particularly cathartic. "Once we found out that was something he'd wanted originally, it felt beautiful," Davis says.

So, now, with Miranda admitting that he's *finally* witnessed a "musical fight sequence with grit" in this year's Broadway hit *The Outsiders*, are there any plans to turn the album into a bona fide theatrical experience? "No plans yet," Davis grins. "But lots of hopes."

Watch this space — *The Warriors* may be back out to play soon.

***WARRIORS* IS OUT NOW TO STREAM AND DOWNLOAD**

Jimmy Fontaine/Atlantic Records

HOW A WADDLING BIRD GOT TO SOAR

THE PENGUIN SHOWRUNNER LAUREN LEFRANC ON HOW SHE MADE HER BATMAN-FREE HBO SERIES APPOINTMENT TV

Left: An unrecognisable Colin Farrell as the titular villain. **Below left:** Oz with Sofia Falcone (Cristin Milioti).

"WHO YA CALLIN' CARTOONISH?!" *The Penguin* showrunner Lauren LeFranc channels her problematic protagonist Oz Cobb when *Empire* asks how, over eight thrilling episodes, she turned one of the Batman pantheon's silliest villains — billed in comics as the 'be-monocled bird' — into arguably the most complex and compelling we've yet seen from a comic-book-adaptation. "No, but seriously, I get it," she adds, thankfully, instead of choking us to death.

LeFranc puts the show's success (in terms of both viewing figures and critical response) largely down to the prosthetics-enhanced Colin Farrell in the lead role: "He brings real humanity to Oz, and without that none of what is on the page would have translated to the audience." She also gives credit to writer-director Matt Reeves' work establishing Oz in *The Batman*, which for her raised many interesting questions. Questions she asked "starting from the inside out, with empathy. Empathy and curiosity might be a writer's greatest tools."

She thought about his childhood, and his mother, and other characters who'd bring out different sides to Oz, not least his similarly complex nemesis Sofia Falcone/Gigante (Cristin Milioti — who LeFranc says brought "wit and humour, along with volatility" to the role). But, most importantly, she says, "I put aside whatever genre people might categorise *The Penguin* to be in, and thought about Oz — and all our characters — as real living and breathing humans. Once I did that, I found incredible richness and complexity."

One of the most impressive (but also disturbing) things about *The Penguin* is how much we find ourselves rooting for Oz, while simultaneously learning just how deep his villainy goes. It's all about holding a mirror up to the audience, LeFranc explains. "Personally, I connect to him because he's an underdog. He started with many disadvantages and somehow finds a way to persevere. Now, *how* he perseveres... Well, it's despicable and self-serving. *But* Oz also speaks some truths along the way." She gives the example of when he tells young mentee Victor (Rhenzy Feliz) that the world isn't set up for the honest person to succeed. "He's not entirely wrong. Criminality is often born from injustice. There are many people like Oz in our world today, and for better or worse, I think that's why it's hard to look away."

It's also hard to resist asking LeFranc a big question that's been on all our lips since the show landed: where was Batman during all this bloody kingpin-making madness? "What Matt reiterated to me early on is that it's a big city and Batman can't be everywhere," she replies. "He doesn't have a Spidey-sense that tingles. But just because we don't see Batman in our show doesn't mean he's unaware or uncaring."

Besides, he's being saved for Reeves' next film, which *The Penguin* very much sets up with its final shot. "Our show is the bridge between the first and second film," LeFranc confirms, "which means the events that have taken place in Gotham City, and the repercussions that come with them, will carry into the next film." So don't worry. The bat and the bird *will* clash again. **DAN JOLIN**

***THE PENGUIN* IS OUT NOW ON SKY AND NOW**

THE UNSTOPPABLE TREVOR SLATTERY

THIS LIVERPUDLIAN MCU THESPIAN JUST WON'T QUIT

IRON MAN 3 2013

The megalomaniacal villain Mandarin turns out to be Trevor Slattery, a washed-up actor from Liverpool (allegedly) whose Lear was the toast of Croydon. Ben Kingsley only goes full Trevor in one scene, in which he bamboozles Robert Downey Jr's Tony Stark, but an MCU icon is born.

ALL HAIL THE KING 2014

Iron Man 3 co-writer Drew Pearce made his directorial debut with this hilarious Marvel One-Shot (remember them?) in which Trevor goes to prison, and while being interviewed by a documentary filmmaker bumps up against both Sam Rockwell's Justin Hammer and the real Mandarin's men.

SHANG-CHI AND THE LEGEND OF THE TEN RINGS 2021

Rehabbed, but still addled, Trevor shows up working for the Mandarin as a jester of sorts, and winds up on a quest with Shang-Chi, accompanied by Morris, an otherworldly animal with a bum for a face. Worth it for Trevor's memory of *Planet Of The Apes* alone.

WONDER MAN 2025

Our Trev will show up in the Hollywood-set show due next year, seemingly as a mentor to Yahya Abdul-Mateen II's actor-turned-hero, Simon Williams. Questions abound: how is Trevor feeling these days? Will his accent hit the heights of Huyton? And can an Oscar be far behind? **CHRIS HEWITT**

The erotic thriller that puts women on top

ACTOR-TURNED-FILMMAKER HALINA REIJN ON REVAMPING A GENRE CLOSE TO HER HEART WITH **BABYGIRL**

WORDS **JOHN NUGENT**

BACK IN 2006, Halina Reijn attended the Venice Film Festival in support of her latest performance as an actor: *Black Book*, a war drama by Paul Verhoeven. Nearly 20 years later, she returned to the festival as a writer-director with *Babygirl*: a film at least partly inspired by Verhoeven's '90s erotic-thriller heyday. "This time [I had] never been so nervous in my entire life," she tells *Empire*.

To Reijn's relief, the reception at the premiere of *Babygirl* — an unpredictable and frequently graphic erotic thriller starring Nicole Kidman and Harris Dickinson — was nerve-calmingly positive. "It's an *interesting* film to stay in the room with your audience, with Nicole sitting there while they are watching it," she says. (There is a sex scene before the opening credits even roll.) "But you just felt the audience was really breathing with us and embracing it. And then the reactions after were so wonderful."

It's a gratifying response to a new take on an old genre, of which fellow Dutchperson Verhoeven was a master. "*Basic Instinct*, *9½ Weeks*, *Indecent Proposal*, *Unfaithful*... all of those films made me feel a lot less isolated and lonely within my own sexuality; desires that I often was very embarrassed about," Reijn explains. "But all those films ended with the femme fatale being punished, or with a superficial, clichéd image of a woman. Someone would die, or get killed. I wasn't interested in that. I always thought: 'Oh, I wish I could create my own endings to these stories.'"

Clockwise from main: Steamy times for CEO Romy (Nicole Kidman) and intern Samuel (Harris Dickinson); Passions rise; Romy with husband Jacob (Antonio Banderas); Writer-director Halina Reijn on set with Kidman.

So she began writing what became *Babygirl*, a story about a powerful tech CEO (Kidman) who engages in fiery sexual power-play with a much younger intern (Dickinson). The '90s template was a jumping-off point, but Reijn was keen to move past it, too. "We play with all the tropes of a thriller, and we're having fun with it, and it's campy and juicy and nice," she says. "But all of the characters are ambiguous. All of them are dark and light, like life itself. There is no

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft, Getty Images

Walt Disney ending to these things in life."

For Reijn, making this film felt like a deeply personal project. "I've been an actor all my life," she says. "My whole obsession has always been power, control, surrender. So when I decided to become a director, I wanted to make a movie about the question: is it possible to embrace yourself completely, and not just the parts of yourself that you like that are shiny and pleasing and nice for other people?"

The answer to that question arrives via a complex, sexy and witty cat-and-mouse game, as both Kidman and Dickinson's characters take turns gaining the upper hand. "I wanted to make a comedy of manners, if you will, about power and sex. And I really wanted to have fun with it. But at the core of it is this really deep subject for me, about female bodies, female pleasure, the 'orgasm gap'" — the term referring to the disparity in how often men and women experience orgasms — "and the beast inside me. What I really wanted to do is create a warm, positive, celebratory moment, especially for women, but also men, where they would go home and feel enthusiastic about pleasure and joy." By watching this film, Reijn hopes, people will no longer have to ignore their basic instincts.

***BABYGIRL* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 10 JANUARY**

NEED TO KNOW

GET UP TO SPEED ON... BUGONIA

IT SEES YORGOS LANTHIMOS TACKLE SCIENCE-FICTION

The Greek provocateur is taking his trademark treacle-black comedy into the realm of aliens and cover-ups. Based largely on the 2003 South Korean sci-fi comedy *Save The Green Planet!*, *Bugonia* will follow two conspiracy-obsessed men who kidnap the CEO of a major company as they are convinced she is an alien hellbent on destroying Earth. The jury's out on whether other aspects of the original film — killer bees, a tightrope walker, a weaponised exfoliator mitt — will make the cut.

THERE ARE REUNIONS GALORE

The film sees Lanthimos and Stone continue their freaky answer to Scorsese and De Niro, with this being their fourth outing together (Stone will play the aforementioned CEO). *Kinds Of Kindness* star Jesse Plemons will also reunite with the pair, reportedly as one of the kidnappers. And in an ongoing partnership few saw coming, Alicia Silverstone will also appear in an undisclosed role after playing the mother of Barry Keoghan's vengeful psychopath in *The Killing Of A Sacred Deer*. As if!

ARI ASTER IS INVOLVED

CJ Entertainment, the South Korean studio and distributor behind *Save The...* and later *Parasite*, had been considering a Hollywood remake of the former since its release, as it grew by word-of-mouth to be a cult hit. Then in 2018 Ari Aster hosted a screening of the film in Los Angeles. "Swinging with youthful abandon between white-knuckle suspense, absurd slapstick, grim horror and a deeply felt (and earned) sense of tragedy, *Save The Green Planet!* is one of the most remarkable films to come out of South Korea," he said at the time. Aster is on board Lanthimos' film as producer.

THERE'S BEEN A SIGNIFICANT CHANGE TO THE STORY

Aster was instrumental in bringing on screenwriter Will Tracy, best known for *The Menu* and *Succession*. He was also involved in the decision to change the CEO character from male to female, along with *Save The...* director Jang Joon-hwan, who was originally intended to helm the remake. "Given today's zeitgeist, [we] decided to change the sex of the character," said a CJ executive.

IT'S ALREADY IN THE CAN

As if having not one but two films released in the space of six months with *Poor Things* and *Kinds Of Kindness* wasn't enough — with the former earning 11 Oscar nominations and four wins — Lanthimos has also shot *Bugonia* in its entirety, with the film wrapping in September after filming in High Wycombe and Atlanta. This auteur deserves a holiday. **WHITNEY JONES**

***BUGONIA* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 NOVEMBER 2025**

Destined or friend zone? Simon (Brett Goldstein) and Laura (Imogen Poots). **Below:** The staring contest was neck and neck.

Brett Goldstein takes the lead

THE COMEDY STAR AND WRITER MOVES INTO CENTRE FRAME WITH SCI-FI ROMANCE ALL OF YOU

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

BRETT GOLDSTEIN MAY have found global fame as foul-mouthed footballer Roy Kent in *Ted Lasso*. But in *All About You*, a tender romantic dramedy with a slight sci-fi twist, he leaves midfield behind and steps into a new role: leading man.

Goldstein stars alongside Imogen Poots as Simon and Laura, two lifelong friends who seem destined for each other. Until she takes a test which purports to identify her soulmate, and it isn't Simon. Complications ensue, giving Goldstein the chance to be funny and charming and tender and melancholy by turns. If it seems tailor-made for him, it was. He wrote it, along with the director, William Bridges. "It's easier to write for yourself," he explains. "I know what my voice sounds like. I can change stuff if it doesn't sound right. When you've written it, you've already acted it in your head."

The past four years have been a whirlwind for Goldstein, full of Emmy wins, a second show that he wrote (*Shrinking*, starring Harrison Ford) and a Marvel cameo as Hercules in *Thor: Love And Thunder*. But the idea of *All Of You* has been with him throughout it all, after Goldstein and Bridges first explored it in a short film called *For Life* in 2013. "I couldn't stop thinking about it," he recalls. "We started talking about what would happen two years [after we first meet them], and then two years later than that." Which is why the film spans over a decade. "A lot of films are about longing," he says. "But you just see the times that they are together, and as an audience you're being a detective, having to work out what's happened."

To be clear, Goldstein isn't the kind of actor who is motivated by being number one on the call sheet. He had taken up the mantle once before, in 2015 British comedy *SuperBob*, but is careful in the roles that he chooses. "Something that I'm doing soon, I was offered a big part in, but I asked to do a much smaller part," he admits. "My team were like, 'You're mad, they're offering you the big part!' And I was like, 'Yeah, but someone is right for that, and it isn't me. I should be doing this one, because that one is right for me.'"

Marco Vittur

All Of You, however, was too close to home to resist. "This film is very, very personal," he explains. "It's the culmination of all my thoughts on relationships, and love. Everyone has a relationship like in this film — is it love? Is it friendship? Is it attraction? What is this special thing they have?"

Love is something that he's keen to explore further moving forward, as he again pulls double duty on *Office Romance*, an upcoming film that he's writing for and will star in with Jennifer Lopez. "We want to make a proper, big romcom," he says. "I just want to make good shit." The squad player might just be ready to become the star man after all.

***ALL OF YOU* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**

THE MISFIT-MOLLUSC FILM WINNING HEARTS

FILMMAKER ADAM ELLIOT ON HIS STOP-MOTION FESTIVAL HIT MEMOIR OF A SNAIL

MEMOIR OF A Snail — the stop-motion tragicomedy winning over audiences and film-festival juries alike — is a story about coming out of your shell, almost literally. To be clear, its painfully shy protagonist Grace Pudel (Sarah Snook) is a human. But her love of molluscs spirals into an obsession as she hoards all manner of memorabilia in her suburban house in Canberra, Australia. Over 7,000 minuscule snail-related props later, and writer-director Adam Elliot admits, "There were days when I wished I'd written a film about a minimalist."

Elliot's bittersweet fable was inspired by his late father's hoarding and his discovery that most people with an extreme level of the condition have experienced a traumatic loss in childhood. Orphaned and separated from her twin brother Gilbert (Kodi Smit-McPhee), Grace endures profound isolation and finds comfort in hoarding, while Gilbert is adopted by an exploitative Christian fundamentalist family.

At times, *Memoir* — which recently won the Best Film award at the BFI London Film Festival — is almost unbearably heartbreaking. But Elliot, whose 2009 stop-motion debut *Mary And Max* saw Philip Seymour Hoffman voice a reclusive man with Asperger syndrome, likes to make things darkest before the dawn.

Top to bottom: Grace (Sarah Snook), in full snail garb, with a mollusc mate; The siblings with Dad before tragedy strikes.

"I certainly love to torture my protagonists and make them suffer, but then I always try and reward them at the end," he explains. And there's plenty of joy to be found in *Memoir Of A Snail*, largely through Grace's friend Pinky (Jacki Weaver), an eccentric elderly lady inspired by *Harold And Maude*'s Maude, who was an exotic dancer in a former life.

For Elliot, this story is profoundly personal. "Grace is a misfit loner and I certainly still feel like that, even in the film industry," he says. "I feel like I'm the weird one in the corner, doing Plasticine." But he's found that audiences feel deeply emotionally connected to his films, despite how specific they are: "It's so gratifying how much Grace resonates with people. I think all of us have felt like misfits, and that's why she's relatable."

He does not, however, share his hero's affection for snails, even after eight years of work on the film. "I think it's lovely that people have a real affinity for snails, but personally, I love them with garlic sauce," he deadpans. Talk about a shell-shock. **LAURA VENNING**

***MEMOIR OF A SNAIL* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 FEBRUARY**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... *TERRIFIER* STOWAWAYS

The Wild Robot has cashed in thanks to its animated charms, but some speculators believe a small box-office bump came from teens buying tickets for the PG movie and sneaking into 18-rated gorefest *Terrifier 3*. If they made it through the opening ten minutes, they have my undying respect.

JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT... AL PACINO'S *SHREK* PHONE CASE

Al Pacino has outed himself as an inadvertent Shrek-head. Since his daughter gave him a phone case adorned with the grumpy ogre, it's apparently become his favourite accessory. Wonder if Robert De Niro's phone case is *Bee Movie*-branded?

BEN TRAVIS IS THINKING ABOUT... A HOLLYWOOD-INSPIRED INDIE BAND

The brilliantly named Dananananaykroyd (Scottish; two singers; two drummers) burned short and bright, splitting in 2011. With their debut album *Hey Everyone!* finally out on vinyl, I'm curious whether Dan Aykroyd knows a band was named after him?

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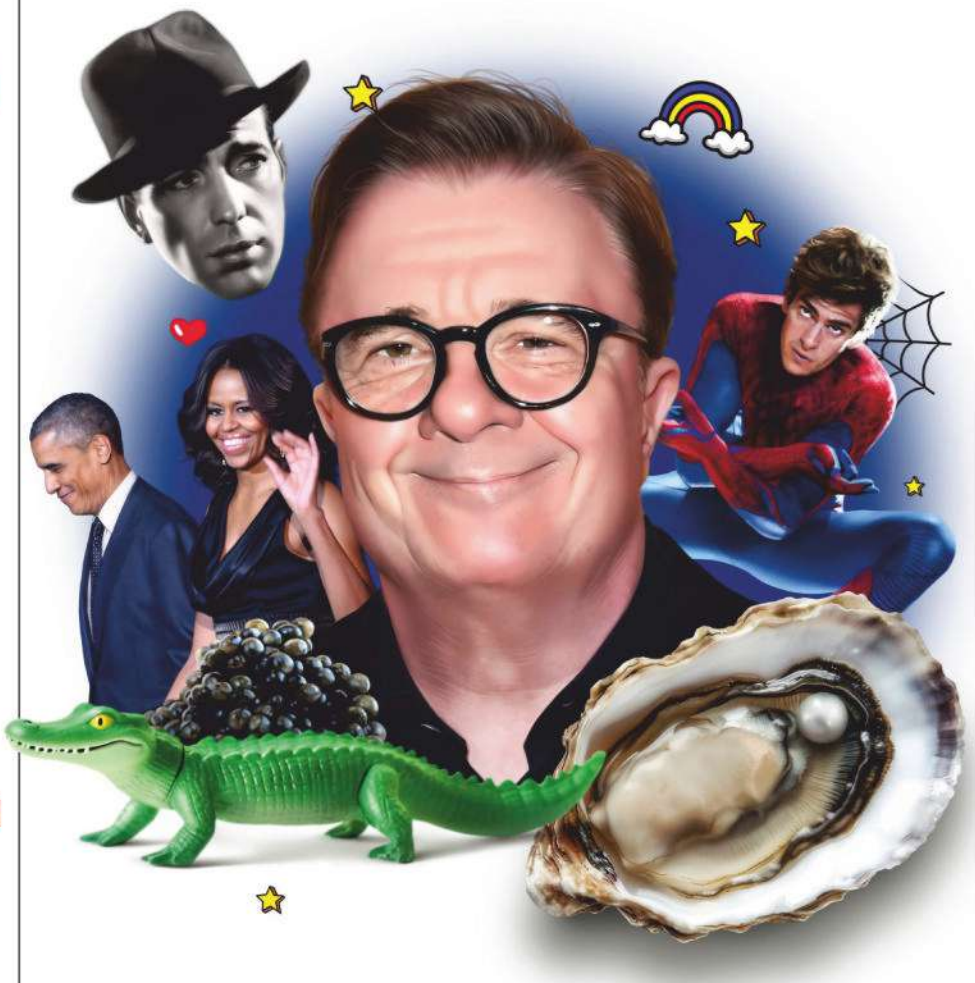
How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Nathan Lane

THE TONY-WINNING TALENT AND *SPELLBOUND* STAR TAKES OUR DAIRY QUESTIONNAIRE



WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

ARNO

When were you most starstruck in your life?
I get starstruck a lot. And nervous and insecure. I don't want to bother anybody. (*Laughs*) But I've been around a long time, so there's been Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Al Pacino, Barbra Streisand — people like that. Barack and Michelle Obama, too: you're definitely starstruck when you meet them. I hosted an 'Evening Of Broadway' once in the East Room [of the White House], and you get escorted in to meet them. It was one of those, "How do you do? Keep up the good work!" — and then the next person was escorted in. But it was very exciting. I'm a big fan of theirs.

What was your first pet?
Well, I came from a very dysfunctional, chaotic household. My father was an alcoholic, and my mother was bi-polar. This was not the kind of household where you thought, "Hey, let's get a dog! That'll help!" It was more: "Don't put anybody else through this trauma!" But when I was young, my brother got me a little German Schnauzer. I called him Max. He was very highly strung and neurotic, so in some ways he fit into our household perfectly. (*Laughs*) But it was not a good situation, so after about a year, my brother found him another home with a family out in the countryside. I hope he had a good life.

Who's the best Tom: Cruise or Hanks?
Well, that's a trick question. I would say they are both the best individual Toms they can be. Each one has excelled in a very different kind of career. I mean, my God — they've both been able to maintain movie stardom over a *very* long period of time, which is near impossible in this day and age. Maybe in the old [Hollywood] studio days [it was easier], but today it's really remarkable. And those two Toms have achieved it.

What's the most disgusting thing you've ever eaten?
I'm more adventurous than I used to be in terms of cuisine. As a kid it was just, "Give me a hamburger and I'm happy." But even today, I'll hear someone say, "Oh you *must* try this wonderful delicacy!" and I usually end up spitting it up seconds later. I've never liked caviar, because of the texture. Texture is important. Like oysters: the way people drop them down their gullets! That's disgusting to me. I just can't.

How much is a pint of milk?
I usually buy a quart or a gallon of milk. I buy a pint of half-and-half sometimes. I'm thinking that's maybe... three or four dollars. Honestly, I don't know. Four bucks.

Do you have a favourite superhero?
Look, I'm not a big Marvel guy. You'll never see me in a Marvel movie. I'm not going to pop up in Wakanda — unless somebody needs a lawyer, or something. (*Laughs*) But I do get a big kick out of Ryan Reynolds as Deadpool. He's very funny in that. And I love my old pal Andrew Garfield as Spider-Man. I like Tom Holland, too, but I get very sentimental when I see Andrew as Spider-Man.

What song would you like played at your funeral?
I don't know about at the funeral, but if there's a memorial I'd like the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. And they can end with '(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You.' Just to maintain the morbid theme.

Which movie have you seen the most?
Oh, this is like the Letterboxd thing, where they ask for your four favourite films — which is an impossible task. But off the top of my head — probably because I'm old — I think it's *Casablanca*. Or *Citizen Kane*. Those two.

Do you have an irrational fear?
It's not really irrational, but if I read about a shark attack, or some little old lady in Florida walking too close to the water and getting eaten by an alligator — I find that very upsetting. Which is why I stay out of Florida. That, and many other reasons.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?
Synchronised swimming! No, I don't know what I do better than anyone else. That would be patting myself on the back. That's for others to say. As Mike Nichols used to put it: "I'm the bird, you're the ornithologist."

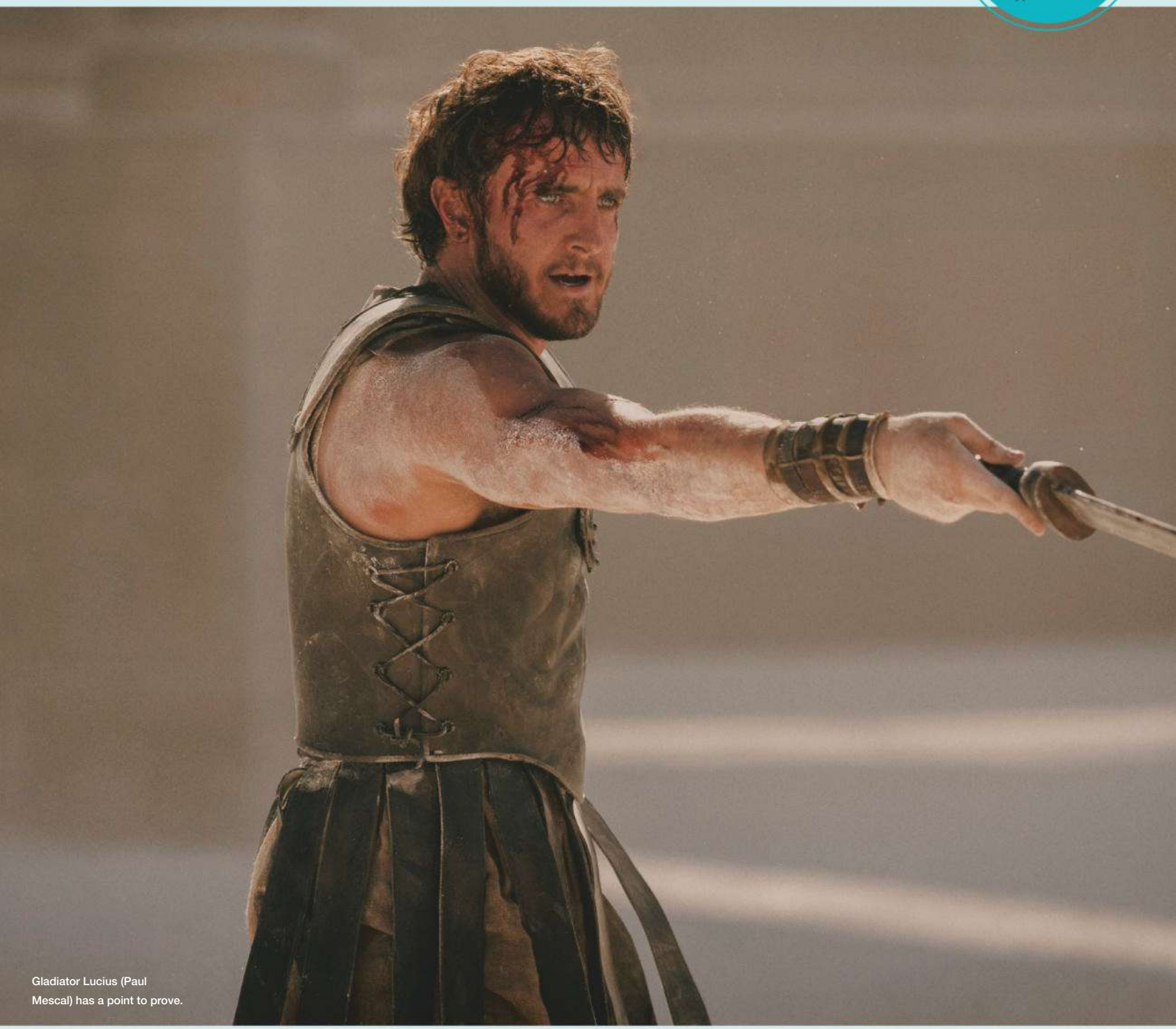
***SPELLBOUND* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 22 NOVEMBER**

reviews

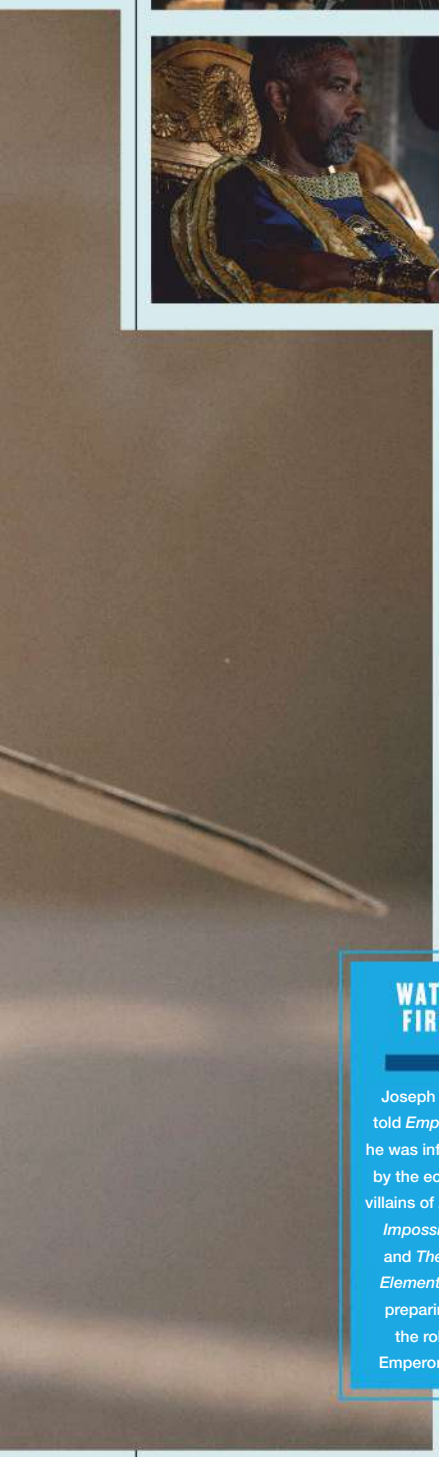
FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

21 NOVEMBER-18 DECEMBER 2024 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES



Gladiator Lucius (Paul Mescal) has a point to prove.



Top to bottom: Lucius' mother Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) makes a return; Marcus Acacius (Pedro Pascal) is out for blood; Arms dealer Macrinus (Denzel Washington) is out for power.

WATCH FIRST

Joseph Quinn told *Empire* that he was influenced by the eccentric villains of *Mission: Impossible III* and *The Fifth Element* when preparing for the role of Emperor Geta.

FILM

GLADIATOR II

WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO REVIEW, SALUTE YOU!

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **148 MINS**

DIRECTOR Ridley Scott
CAST Paul Mescal, Pedro Pascal, Denzel Washington, Joseph Quinn, Connie Nielsen, Derek Jacobi, Fred Hechinger

PLOT Twenty years after being sent away to Africa by his mother Lucilla (Nielsen), Lucius (Mescal) returns to Rome, forced to join a stable of gladiators.

AS HE ENTERS his 88th year, Ridley Scott seems to be having more fun than ever. Early on in *Gladiator II*, for example, during Paul Mescal's first big showcase scene as ripped fighter Lucius Verus, Sir Ridley throws a whole troop of ravenous, screeching baboons into the arena to attack Lucius and his fellow gladiators. These demented primates look more like evil little CGI aliens than actual monkeys, but this startling Attack Of The Wild Baboons is just the *amuse-bouche* for the lavish menu of no-holds-barred, giddily entertaining set-pieces to come. One brilliantly executed fight scene involves a giant marauding rhino, and another somehow features... sharks. Yes, there's a bunch of the blood-thirsty beasts merrily swimming around in the arena during a re-creation of a sea battle, which will have you Googling "Did they *really* flood the Colosseum?"

Historically accurate or not, the sight of marine predators in this film — the long-awaited sequel to Scott's iconic, Russell Crowe-starring, swords-and-sandals 2000 original — epitomises the emphasis here on the brutal decadence of the time. There are copious amounts of blood and gore throughout: gruesome decapitations, throat-slashings, and limbs lopped off left, right and centre. One such moment of blood-spurting violence is so borderline comical, you half expect the victim to borrow the line from the Black Knight in *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*: "'Tis but a scratch."

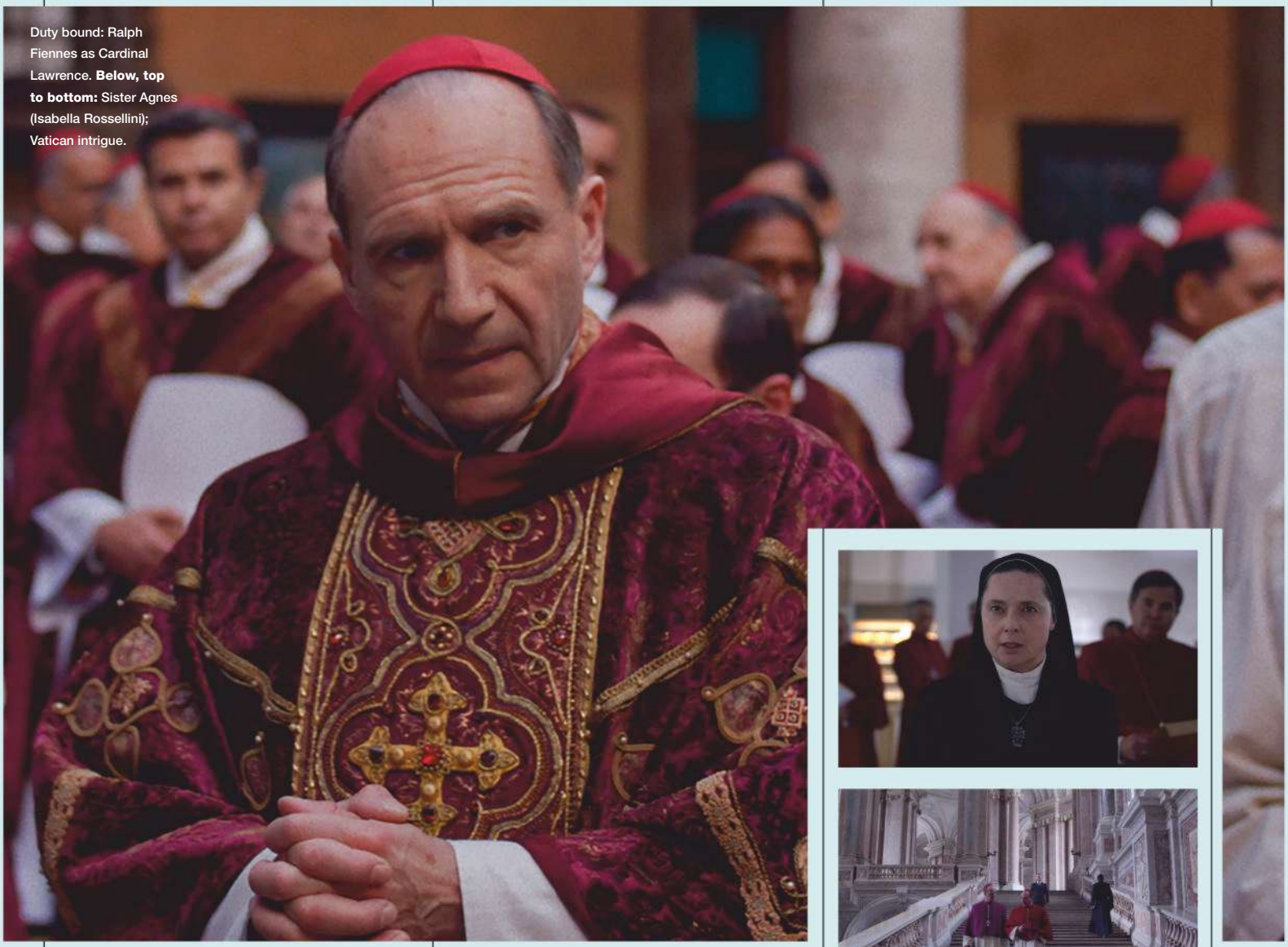
In the middle of all this bloody madness is Paul Mescal's Lucius: the strong, still centre of the movie, around whom all hell is frequently let loose. Mescal effortlessly shifts into leading-man territory with this performance, imbuing the character with an innate dignity and steely determination as he rises to gladiatorial fame, although he isn't above biting a chunk out of a baboon if need be. Like Crowe's Maximus in the original film, Lucius doesn't have much choice about becoming a gladiator; he's bought by former slave-turned-ruthless Roman power-broker Macrinus (Denzel Washington), who's keen to turn him into the star of his stable of beefy human fighting machines. Washington practically steals the whole film, by the way, palpably revelling in the chance to let rip as a smug, self-satisfied schemer of the highest order. Some of his line-readings are pure camp.

The outstanding cast also features Connie Nielsen as Lucilla, the major returnee from the first movie, who hovers over proceedings in quietly imperious style, and Pedro Pascal, as charismatic as ever, playing Marcus Acacius, the Roman general responsible for destroying Lucius' home and family. So while Lucius is grappling with monkeys, sharks and occasionally some actual human fighters, too, he also has a vengeful eye on Marcus. The subsequent plot machinations rely on some pretty convenient coincidences, and Lucius' rise is inevitably formulaic, but it doesn't really matter because the scenes of mind-boggling spectacle are anything but.

Bankrolling that spectacle are the new joint Roman Emperors, young-ish twins Geta (Joseph Quinn) and Caracalla (Fred Hechinger). Not only do they manage to rival Joaquin Phoenix's Commodus from the original *Gladiator* in terms of crazed volatility, they also have a distinct whiff of the ultimate mad emperor Caligula about them. Think John Hurt's pasty-faced look as Caligula in '70s TV classic *I, Claudius* and Malcolm McDowell's version of the same historically bonkers figure in the notorious 1979 film *Caligula*. There's even a hilarious counterpart to Caligula's infamous beloved pet horse, in the form of Caracalla's pet capuchin monkey, perched on his shoulder, who arguably has the film's most startling character arc.

And when Matt Lucas pops up as the equivalent of a stadium announcer at a football match, bellowing brilliantly while the gladiators gather in the Colosseum, you know this isn't a movie that's taking itself too seriously. That's not to say this very belated sequel comes across as 'Carry On Gladiator'. It is in many ways as compelling and expertly staged as the first *Gladiator*, but this one feels less concerned with its own epic-ness and a tad more proudly baroque. There's a fearlessness to its big swings that has to be applauded. It's Ridley Scott Unleashed, and we're here for it. **BOYD HILTON**

VERDICT **What could have been a ponderous, predictable sequel to a much-loved Oscar-winner instead turns out to be a fun romp. However *Gladiator II* fares this awards season, it's a hell of a ride.**



Duty bound: Ralph Fiennes as Cardinal Lawrence. **Below, top to bottom:** Sister Agnes (Isabella Rossellini); Vatican intrigue.

FILM

CONCLAVE

ABANDON POPE, ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE

★★★★

OUT **29 NOVEMBER** / CERT **12A** / **120 MINS**

DIRECTOR Edward Berger
CAST Ralph Fiennes, Stanley Tucci, John Lithgow, Sergio Castellitto, Isabella Rossellini

PLOT Tasked with appointing the new Pope, dutiful Cardinal Lawrence (Fiennes) must wrestle with his convictions amid scandals and surprises.

EDWARD BERGER'S FOLLOW-UP to *All Quiet On The Western Front* is a slickly enjoyable papal popcorn piece about faith in institutions. *Conclave* may be set in the Vatican, but it's practically modelled on American politics: one character even compares one of the movie's many backroom meetings to a US political convention. And yet, Berger's rich detail is specific, nicely combining the worlds of political and religious power play.

The movie opens on a distraught Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) making his way to the Holy Father's chambers to confirm the Pope's demise and prepare to elect his successor. Soon, all the pieces are in play, as Peter Straughan's clockwork screenplay (adapted from the novel by Robert Harris) swiftly establishes each character and plot point like dominoes to be knocked down by hubris, interpersonal tensions hidden by smiling faces. The result is a wildly entertaining balancing act of egos, passive-aggressive battles quietly fought by self-proclaimed righteous men.

Each and every performance is worth lauding. On the one side stands an English-speaking faction (mirroring the political dominance of the West) as they try to elect a progressive pope at any cost. They include Fiennes' English Lawrence, who struggles with his faith while running the conclave; Stanley Tucci's American Cardinal Bellini, whose humility disguises a political savvy; and John Lithgow's shifty Québécois Cardinal Tremblay, whose politeness harbours unpleasant secrets.

Their biggest adversaries include the cartoonish, animated Cardinal Tedesco (Sergio Castellitto), a delightfully moustache-twirling Italian traditionalist, and the more personable Nigerian underdog Cardinal Adeyemi (Lucian Msamati), who embodies the film's notions of political and personal duality. He appears to be a modern choice, but his harmful beliefs and past transgressions complicate his legacy.

Caught in the middle of all this are kindly, Mexican newcomer Cardinal Benitez (Carlos Diehz), secretly stationed in Kabul, and Sister Agnes (Isabella Rossellini), whose own job to serve the cardinals clashes with her duty to protect her convent. Rossellini is *Conclave*'s secret weapon, from her put-upon reactions as she observes in silence, to the way she commands an entire room with little more than a curtsy.

As conspiracies come to light, Berger's winding plot unfolds in tight confines — the cardinals are, after all, sequestered — leading to breathless claustrophobia, aided by cold interiors practically devoid of colour. All that stands out is the cardinals' bright-red attire, matching the passion and bloodlust with which they navigate the movie's shifting political sands. It all unfolds with such precision: an unlikely potboiler that Berger presents not only thoughtfully, but viciously and deliciously. **SIDDHANT ADLAKHA**

VERDICT **A papal thriller that treads on eggshells, *Conclave* is one of the year's most deftly balanced films. Pulpy and pensive in equal measure.**

FILM

GRAND THEFT HAMLET

★★★★

OUT **6 DECEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **89 MINS**
DIRECTORS Sam Crane, Pinny Grylls
CAST Sam Crane, Mark Oosterveen, Pinny Grylls, Jen Cohn

Of the many lockdown movies to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, Sam Crane and Pinny Grylls' *Grand Theft Hamlet* — a surreal documentary in which two out-of-work actors mount a production of Shakespeare's greatest tragedy in the ultraviolent virtual world of *Grand Theft Auto Online* — is easily the funniest. Shot and recorded entirely in-game, thespian Crane and pal Mark Oosterveen's Herculean undertaking is a comedy goldmine, taking in bazooka-wielding, alien stage managers and audience-butchering blimps. What's more, lurking beneath the hijinks is an unexpectedly moving, genuinely quite revolutionary tribute to art's endurance — and importance — in times of crisis. **JK**

FILM

ELTON JOHN: NEVER TOO LATE

★★

OUT **13 DECEMBER (DISNEY+)** / CERT **12A** / **102 MINS**
DIRECTORS R.J. Cutler, David Furnish
PARTICIPANTS Elton John, David Furnish, Bernie Taupin

This documentary of Elton John's life leading up to his final tour is entertaining but frustrating. There are plenty of vibrant visuals and high-energy performances, but the film — co-directed by husband David Furnish — fails to delve deeply into the star's struggles with addiction, family tensions, and identity. Brief, compelling insights into his tumultuous early years and complex relationships are glossed over, and while the never-before-seen archival footage ought to create intimacy, it largely lacks emotional weight. Ultimately, *Never Too Late* prioritises spectacle over substance, failing to provide a genuine understanding of who Elton John truly is — leaving you to ponder why this film exists, when *Rocketman* is right there. **SC**

Jules (Rebecca Ferguson) goes it alone. **Below:** The intimidation game: Robert Sims (Common).

TV

SILO: SEASON 2

REBECCA FERGUSON IS GOING DEEPER UNDERGROUND

★★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **9 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNER Graham Yost
CAST Rebecca Ferguson, Tim Robbins, Common, Harriet Walter, Avi Nash, Rick Gomez, Steve Zahn

PLOT In a dystopian future, Jules (Ferguson) escapes her silo only to discover a new one, stumbling upon a mysterious survivor (Zahn). Meanwhile, rebellion is brewing...

FOLLOWING THAT DOOZY of a cliffhanger last year, *Silo* finally returns to Apple TV+ with a second season that, thankfully, rewards the wait. The first season established some captivating foundations: based on Hugh Howey's book trilogy, it charted the aftermath of an apocalyptic event which forced thousands to co-exist in a strictly governed underground bunker known as the silo. This second instalment — which adapts parts of Howey's books *Wool* and *Shift* — further fleshes out the mythos while introducing fascinating new additions.

Creator and showrunner Graham Yost instantly turns the temperature up on this pressure-cooker of a dystopia. In the fallout of Jules (Rebecca Ferguson) being banished from the silo, tensions quickly boil over between Mayor Bernard Holland (Tim Robbins) and his cronies. Where the first season took a more procedural route, unravelling the central slow-burn mystery, this second run takes a more action-packed approach, even as it keeps up the machinations, power-plays and shock twists.

What also remains is that timely social commentary. With politicians and public figures seeking to control through mass manipulation of the truth, inciting mob mentality in the name of 'order', and class warfare, it's a dystopia not far from our own. As the gaslighting Mayor, Robbins excels, the series digging deeper into the shifting power dynamics between him, Judge Meadows (Tanya Moodie) and Robert Sims (Common). It's enjoyably shocking to see the insane lengths these characters will go to in the name of "protecting the silo"; Sims and his wife Camille (Alexandria Riley), in particular, seem to channel a Macbeth-ian opportunism.

It can, admittedly, be frustrating that all this scheming often comes at the expense of Jules' arc. The burgeoning silo rebellion sometimes takes precedence over the (arguably more engrossing) events of the mysterious new silo, the parallel narrative not always entirely balanced. But Ferguson again shines in the role, embracing its intense physical and emotional demands. She is also afforded a quieter yet touching dynamic with Steve Zahn's mysterious but hugely endearing new addition, Solo.

The world they occupy is still hugely impressive, too. The immersive environments from production designer Gavin Bocquet are just as stunning as they were last season, filled with astonishing detail and craft, and the newly added second silo seems to feature even more practical elements and moving pieces. This, combined with a deeper dive into the silos' compelling mythology, a welcome glimpse into the history of another community, and some fascinating flashbacks, all makes for another atmospheric, tense trip underground. **NICOLA AUSTIN**

VERDICT **While this latest puzzle-box of a season often raises more questions than answers, it remains a gripping series that keeps you guessing whether there's a grain of truth among the lies.**

Paddington (Ben Whishaw) gets all tied up in darkest Peru.

FILM

PADDINGTON IN PERU

THE FUR FLIES (QUITE A LONG WAY)

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **PG** / **106 MINS**

DIRECTOR Dougal Wilson
CAST Ben Whishaw, Emily Mortimer, Olivia Colman, Julie Walters, Jim Broadbent, Hayley Atwell, Imelda Staunton, Antonio Banderas

PLOT Paddington (Whishaw) travels to Peru when his Aunt Lucy (Staunton) goes missing. A nun (Colman) and a river-boat captain (Banderas) are allies in his quest… or are they?

THE BAR FOR the bear has been raised awfully high. A decade ago, the polite, Peruvian furball with a hankering for fruit preserves stormed the box office — and our hearts — with his first cinematic outing. Then *Paddington 2* proved to be *The Godfather Part II* of adorable comedies, enhancing pretty much every aspect of the original and even proving a bonding experience for Nicolas Cage and Pedro Pascal in *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent*. Keeping that triumphant roll going was always going to be a tough order. And so it proves — while this threequel provides laughs and charm and two new A-list bad'uns, there's something intangible missing. The marmalade has lost a bit of its zest.

One issue is that Paddington is no longer out of his element. The marma-lad has left London before, in creator Michael Bond's books — in 1961's *Paddington Abroad*, he headed across the Channel, becoming the first bear ever to (accidentally) compete in the Tour de France — and it makes sense that he would be drawn back to the land of his birth. But as a fun, snappy sequence involving a photobooth at the start of *Paddington In Peru* illustrates, the character is at his most delightful when he's causing pandemonium in polite society. Plonked into his natural environment, the jungle, the laughs become scarcer.

Instead, there's more emphasis on his human family, who *are* now out of their element. New director Dougal Wilson, taking over from Paul King, now on *Wonka*-ing duties, has a lot of moving parts to grapple with here. Via a peculiarly brief guest appearance from Hayley Atwell (doing an unexplained American accent), risk-averse patriarch Henry Brown (Hugh Bonneville) is inspired to face his many fears and accompany Paddington on his rescue mission to South America. Also along for the ride are mum Mary (Emily Mortimer, replacing Sally Hawkins), daughter Judy (Madeleine Harris), son Jonathan (Samuel Joslin) and even live-in housekeeper Mrs Bird (Julie Walters). It's fun to see the whole Brown clan hit the road together, and Bonneville is on particularly winning form, stealing several scenes via a running gag about a rare tarantula. But it not only pulls focus from the duffle-coated star of the show, but leaves a few of the characters adrift — Judy, in particular, gets precious little to do.

The film is more successful with its bad guys. As if aware of how daunting a task it has in matching Nicole Kidman's taxidermy-mad Millicent and Hugh Grant's preening thesp Phoenix Buchanan from the previous instalments, it pits our heroes against not one but two famous-faced foes. Olivia Colman is perfect casting as sinister sister Reverend Mother, overseer of the Home For Retired

KILLER QUOTE

"It's a secret room with lights behind it and I can't tell you what's in there. There's nothing suspicious about that."
THE REVEREND MOTHER (OLIVIA COLMAN)

Top to bottom: Mr Brown (Hugh Bonneville) on the road; Mrs Bird (Julie Walters) and a sinister Sister (Olivia Colman); Hunter Cabot (Antonio Banderas) with daughter Gina (Carla Tous).

Bears (in case you've ever wondered which broadsheet elderly ursines read, it turns out it's 'The Grrrdian'). Whether riffing on *The Sound Of Music*, strumming irritatingly on a guitar, or struggling to keep a phony smile plastered across her face, Colman is great fun, though a little underused. Antonio Banderas, meanwhile, goes full *Kind Hearts And Coronets*, playing not just a boat captain with a secret, but his many descendants.

As *Paddington In Peru* heads down-river, its cinematic influences become clear. There's a lot of *Indiana Jones* in there (weirdly, Banderas also played a boat captain in an actual Indy film last year), plus quite a bit of Herzog, though *Aguirre: The Wrath Of God* never had a scene in which Klaus Kinski got trapped in a hammock. Wilson even throws in a lovely nod to Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, with Paddington standing in for the stone-faced comic. There are spooky temples and booby traps and exotic creatures. Kids will probably have a blast.

The only problem is that we now know just how transcendent these movies can be. And while all of the signature elements are present and correct, right down to the soul-shrivelling hard stare, some of the warmth and wit and dashes of brilliant eccentricity we've become used to are absent. It's perfectly fine, but we (and probably Nicolas Cage and Pedro Pascal) were hoping for more than fine from the world's most loveable bear. Next time: a little more zest, please. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT The *Paddington* series goes 'Raiders Of The Lost Bear', swapping Primrose Hill for the savage jungles of Peru. It's a decent threequel, though a little of the enchantment has been lost in transit.

Tensions rise for Justin Kemp (Nicholas Hoult).

FILM

JUROR #2

CLINT EASTWOOD HAS REACHED A VERDICT

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **114 MINS**

DIRECTOR Clint Eastwood
CAST Nicholas Hoult, Toni Collette, J.K. Simmons, Kiefer Sutherland, Chris Messina, Zoey Deutch, Gabriel Basso

PLOT Father-to-be Justin Kemp (Hoult) is selected for jury service at a murder trial — but it soon becomes clear that he's more involved in the case than expected.

WHETHER PLAYING an outlaw (the Man With No Name of Sergio Leone's 'Dollars Trilogy'), a loose-cannon law-enforcer (*Dirty Harry*) or chronicling the country's most powerful lawman (*J. Edgar*), Clint Eastwood has always had a fascination with justice. At 94 years young and on his 40th effort as director, the Hollywood legend with the iconic grimace has now somehow made one of his best films in years.

Like the late, great William Friedkin, who ended his career with 2023's gripping *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*, Eastwood opts for the confines of a courthouse to explore characters and ideas in a sharp, constantly compelling grown-up procedural. This is a riveting examination of what true justice looks like — the kind of straightforwardly entertaining mid-budget legal drama that would have filled a multiplex back in the '90s.

Working from an original script by Jonathan Abrams — which essentially and inadvertently adapts the classic 1994 *Simpsons* episode 'The Boy Who Knew Too Much' — Eastwood tells the story of Justin Kemp (Nicholas Hoult), a gentle family man preparing for the birth of his first child, reluctantly called to jury duty. He becomes even more reluctant when he realises, with a shock, that he may have had a role in the murder himself, and is forced to wrestle with his wavering moral compass. As a recovering alcoholic, he thoughtfully applies his 12-steps philosophy to the case, but also acts with self-interest. Clearly, he considers himself a fundamentally decent person, and is desperate not to send an apparently innocent if thuggish man to jail — but he also wants to avoid responsibility himself. There's some very ambiguous, Eastwoodian ideas at play here: of masculinity and honour. How far would you go, the film asks, to protect your family?

It's a proper nail-biter — literally, given Hoult spends much of the film biting his nails, a nicely pitched ball of quiet tension. Meanwhile, Hoult's one-time *About A Boy* mum Toni Collette plays Faith Killebrew, the prosecuting attorney wrapped in her own parallel moral quandary, hungrily chasing a guilty verdict for the sake of her political ambitions. Nearly every character, in fact, is granted a generous arc, with many of the jurors bringing a unique perspective to the case — shout out in particular to J.K. Simmons as a grizzled ex-cop who suspects there's more going on here, and Cedric Yarbrough's stubborn hold-out, whose exasperation masks a personal vantage point.

As with all of Eastwood's late-period work, it's low-key, clean, classical filmmaking, efficient and to the point. It is elegantly structured too, diligently following the whole affair from jury selection to court case to *12 Angry Men*-style deliberations. Sometimes that is to a fault — with lines like, "Here's to the justice system!", Eastwood's themes can feel as blunt as a judge's gavel — but it neatly encapsulates his conservative political leanings and his warmth and sensitivity as a filmmaker. This is ultimately a character study about a crisis of conscience, told empathetically and with the cool confidence and steady hand that seven decades in the industry affords. He's still got it. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT If this is to be a swansong, it's a fitting one: a thrillingly watchable legal thriller about truth, justice and (for better and for worse) the American way, as told by an all-American icon.

Venom makes a splash. **Below:** Eddie Brock (Tom Hardy) finds a soon-to-be-Venomed-up steed.

FILM

VENOM: THE LAST DANCE

THE SYMBIOTE SAYS SAYONARA

★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **109 MINS**

DIRECTOR Kelly Marcel
CAST Tom Hardy, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Juno Temple, Rhys Ifans, Peggy Lu, Stephen Graham

PLOT As they're pursued by interdimensional monsters, Eddie Brock (Hardy) and his symbiote Venom discover their time together may have to come to an end.

THE COMMERCIAL SUCCESS of the *Venom* franchise — the first two films made over $1.3 billion internationally — in spite of a repeat critical bashing should give it licence to just do as it pleases. When you're critic-proof, why not let your freak flag fly? Take some crazy swings. One of the more disappointing things about the series, and especially this instalment, is a seeming nervousness about straying from formula. Despite its title character supposedly being an agent of chaos, it only flirts with proper weirdness, always letting its more conservative side prevail.

At the end of the last movie, Eddie Brock (Tom Hardy) and his flesh-eating alien alter-ego Venom (also Hardy, via fully committed growling vocals) were on the run, unfairly wanted for the ostensible murder of a policeman (Stephen Graham). All that becomes mere inconvenience when Venom learns he's being hunted by minions of his tyrannical creator, Knull, who needs Venom to free him from some kind of goth tree prison. The only way to foil Knull is for either Brock or Venom to die.

As a set-up it makes little sense, but it's all to try to give some emotional heft to this apparently final film. Man and goop must be

separated or Earth will perish. There is something about the Venom/Brock dynamic that just about carries these films, but it hasn't built the character foundations it needs to land this story. Watching Hardy bicker with himself can be fun, but it's all pretty one-note, and the comedy of it is never pushed very hard. The series has always had the potential to be something genuinely unique in the superhero-movie genre, a sort of *Deadpool*-ish anarchic comedy with a horror twist, if only it would take a risk.

Instead, we get lame sequences like Brock/Venom smashing up a bar making cocktails, and a flatpack plot involving Area 51, some more vials of alien slop, and far too much time with a hippy family on a road trip. Kelly Marcel, a writer on the first two films, moves into the director's seat here. It's not fully fair to judge a debut director's skills based on the third movie in a franchise, with all the constraints that brings, but she does a functional job. Her action sequences are decent. It's more surprising that her comedy scenes lack zip, and every time there's the possibility of interesting character development — Eddie, at one point, has to kill someone in a way he can't blame on Venom — it's left unexplored.

If, as seems very likely, this concludes the Venom story in its current form, then it wraps up as a series that sadly never fulfilled its promise. There have been moments of gonzo enjoyment along the way, but like its title character, it is in essence just a dark, globby mess. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT **It's third time unlucky for a series that still hasn't worked out what it wants to be. *The Last Dance* can't find its rhythm.**

FILM

MAGPIE

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **90 MINS**
DIRECTOR Sam Yates
CAST Daisy Ridley, Shazad Latif, Matilda Lutz, Hiba Ahmed

Producing and starring in this thriller based on her own story idea, Daisy Ridley shines as Anette, a young mother who's left holding the baby, literally, while writer hubby Ben (Shazad Latif) chaperones their other daughter, Matilda (Hiba Ahmed), on a movie set. Bored, isolated Anette feels unseen, and she's not wrong — Ben only has eyes for Matilda's famous co-star, Alicia (Matilda Lutz). Theatre director Sam Yates' screen debut unfurls a slow-burn tale of adultery, gaslighting and rising righteous fury, as Anette finally decides she's had it with accommodating this man-child with a man-bun. While it stays a little too cool and calculated to truly ruffle viewers' psychic feathers, the third act is nicely unhinged. **JG**

FILM

MUSIC BY JOHN WILLIAMS

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** / CERT **12A** / **105 MINS**
DIRECTOR Laurent Bouzereau
CONTRIBUTORS John Williams, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, J.J. Abrams

It begins with *Jaws*. Of course. Has any composer in history utilised two simple notes so effectively, so iconically? There is certainly a sense of well-trodden ground in this fairly cosy documentary, but this is John Williams we're talking about. Few figures inspire such universal reverence. For all its occasional weaknesses, this film does an excellent job of capturing that importance, at one point demonstrating how differently a film plays without his score — the music storytelling in its own right. A starry line-up sing his praises, including Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, alongside Williams himself, but the music is the real star. Williams is the best to ever do it, and this film is a good reminder of how, and why. **JN**

Smokin': William (Daniel Craig) and Eugene (Drew Starkey) make a connection.

FILM

QUEER

DANIEL CRAIG HEADS ON DOWN TO MEXICO

★★★

OUT **13 DECEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **135 MINS**

DIRECTOR Luca Guadagnino
CAST Daniel Craig, Drew Starkey, Jason Schwartzman, Lesley Manville, Henry Zaga, David Lowery, Drew Droege

PLOT Mexico City, 1940s. American writer William Lee (Craig) becomes obsessed with younger man Eugene Allerton (Starkey); soon the pair go on a hallucinogenic journey into their own minds.

A MERE NINE months after the triumphant Grand Slam of *Challengers*, director Luca Guadagnino is back again. *Queer* is a very different beast to his earlier, tennis-based *ménage à trois*: less straightforwardly entertaining, murkier and messier in its intentions and approach. But it has all of his recurring themes and obsessions: sex and desire and longing and melancholy. It's also perhaps almost too woozy for its own good.

Challengers writer Justin Kuritzkes reunites with his director to (loosely) adapt the novella of the same name by writer William S. Burroughs. Less subversive than Burroughs' most famous work, *Naked Lunch*, in Guadagnino and Kuritzkes' hands it becomes more intensely personal, leaning into the book's autobiographical elements, an unorthodox tribute to the Beat Generation hero.

Daniel Craig — eagerly finding distance from Bond with every role he's taken since hanging up his Walther PPK — is phenomenal as Burroughs surrogate William Lee, an American expat in the gay-cruising haven of Mexico City. (Interestingly, the era's homophobia exists only as an ambient hum.) Though impeccably stylish in period-appropriate summer-casual linen by costume designer Jonathan Anderson, Lee is awkward and vulnerable and boyish — traits only amplified when he meets Eugene Allerton (Drew Starkey), a handsome younger man. Their first encounter, soundtracked to Nirvana's 'Come As You Are' — a genius needle-drop, in more ways than one — pulsates with suspense, Lee subsequently pursuing him with a hunger that becomes desperation. Allerton's beauty and poise somehow throw Lee off his centre; Guadagnino is skilled at finding tension in these early encounters, sexual or otherwise.

The film starts to falter when they leave the safe climes of Mexico City on an ill-advised trip to South America. Lee doesn't seem to know where he stands with the enigmatic Allerton, and for a minute, it feels like we as an audience don't either. The film teeters on its own axis, its dreamlike fuzziness nearly overwhelming. Itching to establish if Allerton is truly queer, Lee journeys into the jungles of Ecuador on a hunt for the psychedelic drug ayahuasca, hoping it will unlock the secrets of telepathy — an extreme response to what he perceives as the tyranny of private minds.

That hunt reaches a surreal climax with an unrecognisable, unforgettable performance from Lesley Manville as an eccentric shaman — minor in screentime but major in impact. These trippy third-act sequences, which see the two men's bodies literally merging in front of our eyes, are freakish and yet oddly moving, heartbreaking, even. It feels like Guadagnino distilled: an erotic display of bodily hungers, underpinned by sadness. *Queer* may not be his best film, but it is arguably the most *him*. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **A feverish, quietly sad exploration of longing and infatuation. Its lack of focus stifles the experience, but Daniel Craig has rarely been as compelling a watch.**

BOOKS

SERGIO LEONE BY HIMSELF

A FISTFUL OF INTERVIEWS

★★★★

AUTHOR **CHRISTOPHER FRAYLING**

"I WAS BORN into cinema," Sergio Leone once said. "I learnt to say 'cut' before I said 'Momma'." This passion for movies — his own, those of his heroes, films in general — courses through Christopher Frayling's *Sergio Leone By Himself*, a visually gorgeous overview of the Italian director's life and works. With his critical study *Spaghetti Westerns* and the biography *Something To Do With Death*, Frayling is Leone's foremost chronicler and he brings all that knowledge and erudition — which he wears very lightly — to bear here.

The book's M.O. is to trace Leone's career both through a carefully curated set of interviews (one by a young Dario Argento) and self-penned pieces illustrated by a plethora of eye-catching stills, posters, family photos, visual influences and ephemera. Each section of Leone's life gets a thoughtful essay by Frayling that joins the dots and adds beautifully written context.

Across the interviews, Leone emerges as a larger-than-life figure. His early life is colourfully outlined, entering the industry working on his father's silent films, playing a young priest in Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* and proving a brilliant assistant director on both Italian and Hollywood epics (he worked on *Ben-Hur*'s chariot race). As you'd expect, his Westerns get the lion's share of the coverage: the legal wrangles over *Yojimbo*, Clint Eastwood, the mythic West, tracking down Lee Van Cleef, Henry Fonda, and two terrific pieces about Peter Bogdanovich's flirtation with directing *Duck, You Sucker* before Leone took over — the Italian dismissed the American as a "sinister CIA agent". Running through the book is the long-gestating gangster flick *Once Upon A Time In America*, a passion project that Leone saw as his way out of the Western. Frayling more than gives the 229-minute masterpiece its due.

There is some overlap among the pieces — there's a drinking game to be built around every time he says, "The Western is a fable" — but, despite protesting hatred of discussing his work, Leone emerges as a terrific talker, full of fascinating insights, great anecdotes and a terrific turn of phrase; to wit, comparing De Niro and Eastwood as actors: "Bobby suffers. Clint yawns."

The book concludes with a series of pieces written by Leone himself, including musings on Ford, Chaplin and Fellini, plus an impassioned piece written on the 90th anniversary of cinema's founding. At every turn the words are punctuated by thoughtfully chosen eye-candy; just like its subject matter's work, *Sergio Leone By Himself* thrives on the power and primacy of the image as much as the dialogue. **IAN FREER**

Leone muse Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly*.

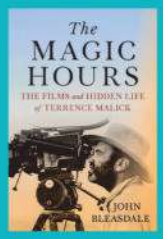
VERDICT **Despite some repetitions, this book mostly delivers the ecstasy of gold: from interview gold to pictorial gold, it's a fantastic tribute to a genius filmmaker.**

ICONS OF CINEMA: BAZ LUHRMANN

★★★★

AUTHOR **EMILY MASKELL**

Baz Luhrmann, Australia's greatest showman, is one of the rare directors whose films are instantly recognisable. Film journalist Emily Maskell goes film-by-film for this straightforward but nicely presented potted history, bolstered by handsome imagery and concept art. In the absence of interview access, each film — and what Maskell describes as his "Luhrmannisms" — is broken down with thoughtful, analytic detail. **JN**

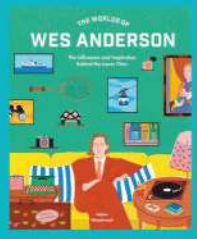


THE MAGIC HOURS

★★★★★

AUTHOR **JOHN BLEASDALE**

A reclusive filmmaker with a famously challenging oeuvre, experimental American auteur Terrence Malick is an ambitious choice of subject for critic John Bleasdale's first non-fiction book. However, through elegantly framed prose, erudite criticism and meticulous research, Bleasdale more than rises to that challenge, mounting a biographical study of Malick and his movies that makes for illuminating reading. **JK**



THE WORLDS OF WES ANDERSON

★★★★

AUTHOR **ADAM WOODWARD**

An iconic filmmaker, Wes Anderson is already the subject of plenty of books; this is an interestingly lateral approach. Rather than pore over his famously meticulous craft, Adam Woodward explores the work that influenced it, from *Paper Moon* and *Tokyo Story* to the artwork of Bruegel and Rothko. It's a fascinatingly sideways celebration — and an absolute recommendation bible. Get ready to fill up your Letterboxd lists. **JN**

© MGM

Left and below: Mothers on a mission Valya (Emily Watson) and Tula Harkonnen (Olivia Williams). **Bottom:** Rebel Keiran Atreides (Chris Mason).

TV

DUNE: PROPHECY

SISTERHOOD ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY/NOW)** / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNER Alison Schapker
CAST Emily Watson, Olivia Williams, Travis Fimmel, Mark Strong, Jade Anouka, Chris Mason

PLOT Ten thousand years before Paul Atreides is born, Mother Superior Valya Harkonnen (Watson) leads the Sisterhood into a perilous power struggle.

FRANK HERBERT'S *DUNE* has always proved fatally hard to adapt. It is material that tripped up filmmakers like David Lynch and Alejandro Jodorowsky; only Denis Villeneuve, with his superb 2021 and 2024 films, has had any luck. You can understand why. It is the hardest of hard sci-fi, the most operatic of space opera, and about as weird as it comes: giant worm-gods, royal incest, psychic mutants, elite lesbian soldiers known as 'Fish Speakers', and a musical-instrument planet known as Chusuk, to just scratch the surface.

Dune: Prophecy decides to stretch back into the lore. Loosely adapting the novel *Sisterhood Of Dune* by Herbert's son Brian and Kevin J. Anderson, it focuses on the early days of the mysterious Sisterhood — later the Bene Gesserit — the puppet masters behind the entire Imperium. Having stalked the wings of Villeneuve's films, the dark-cloaked sorcerers take centre-stage here; the result is a deeper dive into *Dune*, but one which stumbles almost as much as it soars.

It begins in storming fashion. A *Terminator*-style prologue sets the scene, offering tantalising flashbacks to the Butlerian Jihad, the pivotal war between humans and thinking machines. It's here that the ancient blood feud between the Harkonnens and the Atreides is established; a century after this war, that bitter rivalry becomes embodied by Valya Harkonnen, played by Emily Watson and Jessica Barden in flashbacks.

There is *so* much going on here. Valya is desperately trying to maintain power — over the Imperium, over the Sisterhood, and over her family name. Emperor Javicco Corrino (Mark Strong) is trying to maintain his own grip on power, while creepy, Rasputin-like soldier Desmond Hart (Travis Fimmel) quietly schemes to earn his ear. There is also a kind of Sisterhood Police Academy, with a school of fervent acolytes earning 'truth-saying' powers; a rebellious young Atreides (Chris Mason) with a Scouse accent; political assassinations; palace intrigue; AI techno-fear; at least *two* star-cross'd romances between rival houses — and visions of Shai-Hulud.

That's a lot to pack into six episodes, and it doesn't always feel clear what is driving the (space) ship, Herbert's infamously knotty lore often feeling a bit tangly. To be fair, the show has the misfortune of following in the sandy footsteps of Villeneuve, who had a superbly economical approach to adaptation, not to mention being one of modern cinema's masters of aesthetics and tones. As impressive as the visual scale is here, it's simply not on the same level, an inevitable comparison (he was originally due to direct the pilot).

But there's something to be said for the rarity of a huge HBO sci-fi show dominated by female characters, and with storied actors like Watson and Olivia Williams out front, it's enough to keep you coming back to the spice rack. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **It's a mixed start for this first *Dune* spin-off, which can't entirely escape the shadow of Denis Villeneuve. But patience may be rewarded; the Bene Gesserit's plans are measured in centuries, after all.**

KEEP 'EM PEELED

The planet Lankiveil, homeworld of the Harkonnens, is briefly glimpsed here; this is different from Giedi Prime, the Harkonnen planet seen in *Dune: Part Two*.

GAMES

A QUIET PLACE: THE ROAD AHEAD

BE VEWWY, VEWWY QWUIET...

★★★

PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

The car disguise would need work.

IF YOU'VE EVER thought you'd nail surviving in the silenced world of *A Quiet Place*, this is your chance to test that theory. Kicking off on day 105 after the Death Angels' arrival (as seen in *A Quiet Place: Day One*), this puts players in the shoes of Alex (voiced by Anairis Quiñones), a young woman who's just found out she's pregnant — right as her partner Martin is killed on a supplies run.

Alex's pregnancy feels somewhat redundant — especially after *that* birth scene in the first film) — but still adds some pathos to the proceedings, particularly with the fractured relationship she has with Laura, Martin's mother. Quiñones delivers every pained interaction to perfection, as she strives to reach a promised safe encampment for her unborn child.

Played first-person and with a heavy focus on avoiding the creatures, it could have essentially been a reskin of *Alien: Isolation*. Instead, developer Stormind Games brilliantly leans into the monsters' keen sense of hearing and makes audio design integral to the experience. Every action Alex takes makes noise, and while she eventually builds herself a phonometer to measure her movements against ambient sound, every step taken still feels like a risk. She's also asthmatic, and any exertion or stress (like being hunted by carnivorous alien monsters, say) makes a coughing fit more likely, ensuring the hunt for medicine is life-saving in multiple ways.

The Road Ahead also makes excellent use of resistive controls, demanding the least possible pressure on the thumbsticks to gently open doors or drawers without a sound, or to move at the slowest viable speed to avoid audible footsteps. Even more impressively, there's an option to enable your mic — like the one built into the PS5 controller — to detect your real-world audio. One burp at the wrong moment could be Alex's undoing.

Unfortunately, other aspects aren't quite so well-realised. Level design is almost comedically basic in places — telling players not to brush against metal cans, then putting them in a room full of them — and largely linear. There's opportunity to go off-track to seek out lore-building collectibles, but only completionists will find the reward worth the risk. Other survival mechanics feel dated, like torches with batteries that last mere seconds before needing replacing, or throwable objects to lure the monsters away.

Most disappointingly, it's just not that scary. Tense, yes, especially when being hunted, but its few actual jump scares are so telegraphed they rarely land, making it more stealth than horror. Still, it makes for a solid exploration of the world built up in the films. **MATT KAMEN**

VERDICT **Fantastic use of audio and an ability to turn basic actions into masterclasses in tension help *The Road Ahead* stand out, but it doesn't quite live up to its potential.**

SILENT HILL 2 (2024)

★★★★★

PC, PS5

A sacred text of survival horror, *Silent Hill 2* gets a stunning 21st-century remake here. The focus remains on James Sunderland, drawn to the not-so-idyllic titular town by a letter from his dead wife, but expanded locations, deeper puzzles and richer lore make for an even more frightful experience. With original composer Akira Yamaoka returning for a nerve-shredding score, this is horror gaming at its finest. **MK**

PHASMOPHOBIA

★★★★

PS5, XBOX SERIES X/S

This viral horror hit finally makes the leap to consoles. Essentially a video-game version of a ghost-hunter reality TV show, it's fearsomely effective: part investigative game, part survival, all terrifying. With supremely creepy level design (stumbling upon the remains of a human sacrifice will chill you to your core) and ingenious sound effects (you will learn to hate the sound of the wind), this arrives nicely in time for spooky season. **JN**

METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

★★★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

This may seem like a repaint of developer Atlus' *Persona* games, but it's far deeper, using fantasy trappings to explore themes of class and collectivism as players vie for the crown of the corrupt kingdom of Euchronia. Hyper-stylish visuals delight throughout, while a blend of real-time and turn-based combat keeps everything speeding along — helpful when this epic RPG adventure clocks in at 100-plus hours. **MK**

Tennis ball bouncing down street just out of shot.

KILLER QUOTE

"I could crush a walnut with my vagina."
MOTHER (AMY ADAMS)

FILM

NIGHTBITCH

OR, HOW I PET YOUR MOTHER

★★★

OUT **6 DECEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **98 MINS**

DIRECTOR Marielle Heller
CAST Amy Adams, Scoot McNairy, Zoë Chao, Mary Holland, Ella Thomas, Archana Rajan, Jessica Harper

PLOT A stay-at-home mother (Adams) becomes increasingly exhausted by parenting — and to top it off, she seems to be turning into a dog.

THERE ARE PLENTY of famous movie mums. But the actual experience of motherhood — the brutal daily monotony, the blood-sweat-and-milk toil that goes into keeping a tiny human alive — remains a bit of a cinematic rarity. *Nightbitch* is an effort to redress the balance, in uncompromising fashion: it's a funny and freaky and appropriately messy film that's part broad outlandish comedy, part toe-curling body-horror, part feminist treatise.

Adapted from the 2021 magical-realist novel by Rachel Yoder, it sees Amy Adams play the never-named mother, shuffling through life with her infant son while wearing a thousand-yard stare and clothes that haven't been washed in weeks. She is barely keeping it together. Then she starts to notice odd changes to her body: stray hairs, sharper teeth, a keener sense of smell. Is she turning into a dog? Going through perimenopause? Or is she just missing out on a decent night's kip? Adams is remarkable in a deeply unselfconscious performance, as committed when slipping on paint as she is scrabbling about in garden mud.

It's a clever, barking-mad premise. Female bodies, Yoder's book and Heller's script rightly argue, are magical, and it is not only understandable but reasonable that you would apply some kind of witchy logic to the mothering experience. If anything, the film is not quite weird enough, Heller perhaps pulling her punches with the few dog-based sequences — Adams' magical transformation compares unfavourably to were-ancestors like, say, *An American Werewolf In London*.

It's the human side of the story that is most compelling here. Heller has always been interested in how gender collides with her characters: in her coming-of-age debut *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*, it was about pressures and expectations on adolescent women; in *A Beautiful Day In The Neighbourhood*, it was about what it means to be a good man. Here, Heller smartly acknowledges how so much of the issues surrounding motherhood are about time, priorities, divisions of labour and loss of self. Adams' character is chaotic but fundamentally a good and loving parent — the real conflict is with her husband (Scoot McNairy), a dope who doesn't see the mismatch.

Sometimes its message is delivered a little heavy-handedly. Adams' character is given a few monologues which contravene the "show, don't tell" doctrine, with dialogue written as if from an essay. It ends a little too neatly, too, after the mess it follows. But the sanctity of that message is hard to quibble with, and it will undoubtedly be welcomed loudly and relievedly from mothers. It is rare, still, for this huge portion of the population to see themselves on screen like this. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **Its wackier moments sometimes feel like they have more bark than bite, but as an uncommonly honest and authentic depiction of motherhood, *Nightbitch* will come as sharp relief to mums everywhere.**

Our heroes return to ruffle more Feathers.

FILM

WALLACE & GROMIT: VENGEANCE MOST FOWL

CRACKING SEQUEL, GROMIT!

★★★★

OUT **25 DECEMBER (BBC ONE/BBC iPLAYER)** / CERT **U** / **79 MINS**

DIRECTORS Nick Park, Merlin Crossingham
CAST Ben Whitehead, Peter Kay, Lauren Patel, Reece Shearsmith

PLOT Cheese-loving inventor Wallace (Whitehead) and his dog Gromit are targeted by their old enemy, penguin criminal mastermind Feathers McGraw.

THE THING ABOUT making a new *Wallace & Gromit* film is that it's going to be compared to all the other films featuring the Northern inventor and his considerably brighter dog — a nearly unimprovable run of distinctly British delights. The good news is that this effort, featuring the return of villainous penguin Feathers McGraw from *The Wrong Trousers*, doesn't let the side down, even if it doesn't raise us to new heights either.

As we rejoin them, Wallace (voiced again to good effect by Ben Whitehead after the loss of Peter Sallis) has let his inventing run amok, outsourcing even dog-petting to one of his Rube Goldbergian devices. Gromit is fed up even before the overdue bills arrive, but Wallace has a plan: he will rent out his latest invention, a 'smart gnome' called Norbot (Reece Shearsmith), to pay the bills. Unfortunately, somewhere across town, the silent but ruthless criminal mastermind Feathers McGraw is plotting his revenge from a high-security zoo, and he sees an opportunity to get revenge.

It's a fun set-up, and one that's pacily told over a lean 79 minutes. Familiar elements of Wallace and Gromit's outings are used well: Wallace's tendency to abandon Gromit for his latest obsession, the dangerous downsides of high-tech gizmos, and the perfidy of penguins. The detail of the hand-crafted animation remains eternally delightful, though it feels like there are fewer background puns and less incidental humour than in, say, *The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit*. Perhaps strangely given the plot, the film references visible are also less genre-specific, leaning more heavily towards spy movies from Bond to *Mission: Impossible*, and less on, say, *Cape Fear* or *The Fugitive*. And while the final chase is thrilling and funny, it doesn't quite have the invention of that model-train-chase the last time we saw Feathers.

And yet — it's such a treat to return to these characters, particularly the silent pair at the heart of the action. Gromit remains a comic masterstroke, able to convey more feeling with a raised clay eyebrow than some actors manage in their entire career, while Feathers doesn't even have that, managing to communicate a sinister sense of purpose with two beady eyes and a motionless beak. This is the kind of bad guy that not only builds an escape vehicle to enact his dastardly deeds; he installs an organ to soundtrack his plan. The film is almost at its best when Wallace is off-screen and this animation reaches its full potential, as an inventive, madcap tribute to Buster Keaton — except with a dog and a penguin locked in eternal strife. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT It's delightful to see these characters again, particularly the long-suffering Gromit, and if the jokes don't come quite as thick and fast as before, the beating heart beneath the clay remains intact.

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They hoped the situation wouldn't get too out of hand. **Below:** "Can I pick your brain?"

FILM

RUMOURS

NOT AFFILIATED WITH FLEETWOOD MAC

★★★

OUT **6 DECEMBER** / CERT **15** / **104 MINS**

DIRECTORS Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson, Guy Maddin
CAST Cate Blanchett, Alicia Vikander, Roy Dupuis, Denis Ménochet, Nikki Amuka-Bird, Charles Dance

PLOT In the midst of a crisis, world leaders gather for the G7 summit — only to be menaced by bizarre forces.

WHAT COULD BE stranger than the hollow pomp of neoliberal politics in the face of Armageddon? While crafting this cheerfully bonkers satire, Canadian co-directors Guy Maddin and Evan and Galen Johnson became fascinated by real footage of G7 leaders coming across a puddle and awkwardly negotiating walking around it. This miniature farce didn't exactly offer much hope for the future of humanity.

Hosted by German Chancellor Hilda Ortmann (Cate Blanchett in a coral power suit channelling Angela Merkel), world leaders representing Canada, France, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US gather for a summit on a palatial estate. They're here for a terribly serious purpose, of course. But drafting a statement in response to an unspecified catastrophe has to wait until after the hand-shaking and toasting.

The film's tone is knowingly odd from the off, with stilted platitudes between the politicians heightened by cranked-up saturation and intense soft focus that makes this summit look more like a lush melodrama. The American President is played by Charles Dance, inexplicably speaking in his usual English accent.

But having farted around for hours, night falls and the French President (a buffoonish and

brilliant Denis Ménochet) discovers that they are under attack by a horde of masturbating reanimated bog bodies, ancient corpses preserved by mud. These bodies are thought to be leaders executed by their own people, tellingly something these politicians fear far more than the unseen global crisis. It's the kind of surreal shtick typical of the three co-directors (or indeed Ari Aster, credited here as an executive producer).

This dim-witted troupe is forced to wander through the woods to find help, with some pointed commentary about each nation along the way, especially Canada's inferiority complex. Every cast member is clearly enjoying themself, but *Rumours* — or perhaps 'How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bog Bodies' — isn't quite as funny as it seems to think it is. Its lack of narrative point is, in fact, the point, but being paired with gags that raise smiles rather than laughs means it all gets a bit tiresome during its final stretch.

Still, there are some memorably daft set-pieces, like the discovery of "a brain the size of a hatchback", Alicia Vikander babbling prophecies in Swedish and an AI system designed to detect child predators unexpectedly coming in handy. And although this film feels like a cackle in the face of humanity's demise, there's still an earnest frustration at its core towards our real political leaders' march towards oblivion. **LAURA VENNING**

VERDICT **If you like your satire incisive you should perhaps look elsewhere, but the state of the world looks even more laughably absurd through Maddin and the Johnsons' wickedly warped lens.**

also out

HEAD TO EMPIREONLINE.COM TO READ THESE REVIEWS IN FULL

HERETIC

★★★★ **FILM**

"Gore-hounds may find all the pontificating frustrating — make no mistake, this is a slow burn. But for those hankering for a more cerebral scare, this is an unapologetically intellectual chiller that's as challenging for the mind as it is for the nerves." **JAMES DYER**

RED ONE

★★ **FILM**

"Making a truly classic Christmas movie is hard. But you still have to approach them with genuine goodwill in your heart, not some focus-group scores and aspirations of a shared holiday universe. *Red One* feels engineered in a lab to provide seasonal spectacle." **HELEN O'HARA**

STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS: SEASON 5

★★★★ **TV**

"Five seasons in, *Lower Decks* is funnier than ever, successfully navigating that fine line between parody and homage. Although it won't live as long and prosper as much as we'd like, we're just happy to see this show end on what looks like a high. " **DAVID OPIE**

TIME CUT

★★★ **FILM**

"Destined to be forgotten the minute it's finished, this is a passable addition to the slash-up genre — acceptable Halloween fare for the fright-challenged, or anyone with a soft spot for the music of Hilary Duff." **BEN TRAVIS**

THE OFFICE (AUSTRALIA)

★★ **TV**

"Plenty of sitcoms do not find their feet in their first year — most notably, *The Office* US. For now, though, all we can do is offer a weary, bemused glance to camera and hope all this nonsense stops soon." **JOHN NUGENT**

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN ANIME

NO LONGER JUST FOR HARDCORE FANS, THE JAPANESE ANIMATED EXPORT HAS GONE MAINSTREAM — HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

OKAY. FIRST THINGS FIRST. WHAT IS ANIME?

In short: "anime" is the Japanese word for "animation". Within Japan, it refers to anything animated. Outside Japan, it specifically means animation made in Japan. It also sometimes refers to Japanese-inspired animation made elsewhere.

HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN A THING?

Animation in Japan has been around for over a century — but it wasn't until the 1970s that the industry there developed its own voice, style, mood and energy. TV shows like *Astro Boy* and *Mazinger Z* became huge hits, establishing a distinct way of working. Later, TV series like *Dragon Ball Z* and *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* broke through to Western audiences, while films like *Akira*, *Suzume* and Studio Ghibli's Oscar-winning *Spirited Away* made the industry internationally famous.

SO, WHAT MAKES ANIME ANIME?

The artistic style is noticeably different from what you might see in traditional Western animation: there's less character movement, more expressive emoting, bigger eyes, more colourful hair. But it's different in other ways too, with rich storytelling, bold themes, outlandish characters, and an impressive sense of ambition and scale.

IS ANIME A GENRE?

"Animation is a medium, not a genre," director Guillermo del Toro once declared, a maxim which can absolutely be applied to its Japanese form. There is a huge breadth of narratives in the anime world, with practically every genre covered.

ISN'T IT JUST FOR KIDS, THOUGH?

Not at all. Sure, there are plenty of shows suited to family audiences: *kodomomuke* (literally "intended for children") is for younger kids; *shōnen* anime is aimed at, though not exclusively for, young boys; while *shojo* is aimed primarily at young girls. But there are just as many shows tailored to grown-up audiences: *seinen* anime often boasts darker, complex, violent stories, while *josei* explores emotional or romantic themes. And there are plenty of Not Safe For Work options, too.

WHERE DO I START?

It's a good question. The world of anime can be bewildering for a newcomer. Dedicated streaming service Crunchyroll can definitely help you on your journey. It all depends on your mood: if you want epic apocalyptic action with dazzling scale, jaw-dropping plot-twists and deep themes, *Attack On Titan* is for you. If you fancy a wild comic pirate fantasy adventure, then *One Piece* may be more your slice of devil fruit. If you're more into dark magic and murky moral ambiguity, the acclaimed *JUJUTSU KAISEN* may put you under a spell. If a story about a teenage boy who turns his body into chainsaws after signing a pact with a demon-dog is more your bag, you'll be relieved to hear that *Chainsaw Man* exists. The limits for anime are endless. Where will it take you?

Clockwise from main:
Pirate fantasy in *One Piece*; Dark supernatural escapades in *JUJUTSU KAISEN*; Swashbuckling adventure in *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*.

Crunchyroll

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EMPIRE

PRESENTS

THE 2025 PREVIEW

WELL, WE'VE DONE THE MATHS AND THE RESULTS ARE IN: 2025 IS OFFICIALLY GOING TO BE AN OUTSTANDING YEAR. AND WE'VE GOT THE WORLD-EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES TO PROVE IT. ALL OF HUMAN — AND ALIEN, AND ROBOT, AND DRAGON, AND DINOSAUR AND, ERM, TOY MONKEY — LIFE IS HERE. POPCORN AT THE READY…

OUT 23 APR

ANDOR

SEASON 2

THE FIRST SEASON WAS ONE OF THE MOST THRILLING *STAR WARS* OUTINGS IN AEONS. WE SPEAK TO CREATOR **TONY GILROY** AND HIS CAST ABOUT TAKING THE SHOW TO HYPERSPACE

WORDS **MIKE RYAN**

Tony Gilroy was, as he puts it, "fucked". His original grand concept for *Andor* had been sold to Disney as five sprawling seasons, each consisting of 12 episodes. During production of its first season, though, Gilroy realised he had no realistic way of pulling this off. "Oh my God, we are going to have to come up with another *12 hours* of story?" he remembers thinking, back when he needed to start work on the second season. "So I was already panicked. We already said we were going to do five years [of timeline], that was the concept. How do you get out of that?"

While still filming the first season in Scotland, over a glass of Scotch with star Diego Luna, an idea was hatched. "We were figuring out how fucked we were with the concept that we'd ever be able to do this for five years," says Gilroy. "Out of that desperation came... it's a life raft, right?"

We first met Cassian Andor in 2016's *Rogue One*, directed by Gareth Edwards and co-written by Gilroy. Cassian was a Rebel intelligence officer, part of a team of Rebels responsible for stealing the plans for the Death Star; *Andor* picked up five years before those events, as we saw Cassian go from, let's say, down on his luck with not much hope for his future, to someone with an important purpose. But there's still a lot of story to tell.

After Gilroy and Luna's Scotch revelation, the idea of five seasons was scrapped. The second season, which will pick up a year after the events of the first, consists of four three-episode "blocks". Each block will cover a concentrated period of just a few days in the life of Cassian Andor and the formation of the Rebel Alliance. The next block will jump then ahead a full year, allowing the season to span four full years, finally ending literally right before the events of *Rogue One*. "There's no mystery about where we are going," says Gilroy. "We are going to end up on that walk out to the ship with [droid] K-2 and go to the Rings of Kafrene and start *Rogue One*. But why is Cassian going? He's going because there's been some intel."

The first season of *Andor* achieved what has become a rare feat for *Star Wars* in recent years: it was just about universally

Clockwise from main: Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) and Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård); Covert ops for Dilan (Théo Costa-Marini), Cassian Andor (Diego Luna) and Enza Rylanz (Alaïs Lawson); Syril Karn (Kyle Soller) with Dedra Meero (Denise Gough); Creator Tony Gilroy with O'Reilly.

loved by both critics and fans. *Andor* had room to breathe. Nothing felt forced. Characters were meticulously established, then we'd see them in fights for their life, like the ferocious heist at the Imperial base on Aldhani. Or Cassian's daring escape from an Imperial prison on Narkina 5. Or the secret, dangerous partnership between Senator Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly) and Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård). (Says Gilroy of Luthen's role in forming the Rebel Alliance: "I think of him as a founder of a startup. You have a great idea in your garage.") And the acclaim gives the series a lot of momentum and key benefits going into this second season, the kind it may not have been afforded otherwise.

"The critical appreciation of the show was really helpful, if not essential, in helping Disney choke down the price of what this is," says Gilroy, who experienced something increasingly rare these days in the world of franchise intellectual properties: "I never got any notes on this show." But, he adds, "I'm not an arsonist." Meaning, there's a trust there that he's not in this to *burn the whole thing down*. The extensive notes he got on *Rogue One* — things like "no mirrors, paper, or knives" — are now gone. "In terms of creative notes, no-one has come to me and said, 'No, they shouldn't say that.'" Which does amplify the notion that *Andor* is one person's vision of what *Star Wars* should be and can be.

And Gilroy is about to make things really intense for our heroes... and villains.

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It's the duck's guts, as we say in Australia," says Ben Mendelsohn (who returns as *Rogue One*'s Director Orson Krennic — we'll get to him) about *Andor*'s second season. When asked what on earth does that even mean, he says, "That basically means it's the best thing. You may not want to use that. I don't think that was in the 'key talking points' sheet."

Ah, yes, the "key talking points" sheet that, in some form another, was brought up more than once during these interviews. What actually happens, plot-wise, in *Andor*'s second season? Yes, this is a show created by an Oscar-nominated director and screenwriter that has been nominated for eight Emmys and received mass critical acclaim — but it's still *Star Wars* and... let's just say, "I can't answer that," was said in some form or another many times. (A few times in exactly that form.)

"Here's one thing the second season has," teases Luna. "We move in space more than ever — the amount of planets and sets you're going to get to see. There are some familiar and new locations. I don't have to spoil anything. You can just think about the possibility this narrative arc will give us."

"I mean, we have to end up in Yavin, right?" says Gilroy of the giant, orange gas planet, one of whose moons the Rebels use as a hidden base in *Rogue One* and the original *Star Wars*. "So, we'll tell the story of Yavin. No-one has quite dealt with Yavin the way we will be doing it."

When we last saw Mon Mothma, she was entering her daughter Leida (Bronte Carmichael) into a pre-arranged marriage to secure financing for the Rebellion. "It's very much an agreement which has the Rebellion as its driving force," says O'Reilly. "And, yes, it is her daughter. There's a wedding that takes place. The consequences and the complexities of that wedding are what will be revealed."

And then we have Dedra Meero, the dastardly and ambitious Imperial Security Bureau supervisor who very much does not like Cassian Andor. But what about Krennic? "I definitely *do not* marry Orson Krennic," jokes Denise Gough about what Dedra's relationship will be with Mendelsohn's returning character, the Imperial in charge of building the Death Star in *Rogue One* (well, until he's not), hinting they don't always see eye to eye on policy.

"If they didn't see eye to eye, to me, it's cute," says Mendelsohn. "Dedra versus Krennic? I think it's a bit of a mismatch. They're all underlings to Krennic. You know, stuff like that doesn't happen to the Rebel Alliance. They're all going in one direction. The Empire, if you speak your mind, there are differences of opinion." Gough laughs. "You'll have to wait and see. Maybe that's where the romance is? Don't print that, because that's *not* where it's going."

Krennic is quite dashing, again ›

sporting *Rogue One*'s bright white outfit and cape. "You do not have your lunch in the Krennic costume. No lunch, no drink, no nothing," says Mendelsohn of keeping it clean. "The cape, people celebrate," he continues. "Because it's the cape you see. But performing it, it's the boots. The cape doesn't do you any harm, but the boots really give you the *je ne sais quoi*." Gilroy compares Krennic to New York's acclaimed and controversial urban planner Robert Moses. Adding to Krennic's woes this coming season, he's in charge of raising money to build the Death Star, but he's behind schedule and over budget. And we know from the Original Trilogy how his bosses feel about delays.

In *Rogue One*, Krennic didn't just have the Rebels to worry about, but also the ambitions of one Grand Moff Tarkin, played by Peter Cushing in the original film and digitally recreated in *Rogue One*. Will we see Tarkin in the second season of *Andor*? Mendelsohn laughs, "You know I can't answer that. And I delight in not being able to answer your question. It's a beautiful thing."

"I'm not answering that," echoes Gilroy. And yet... "What's interesting is, all of the technology that went into Tarkin [in *Rogue One*], that was like a Manhattan Project. *All* of that technology has been discarded. The moment machine-learning came in, they don't do it that way at all [now]. It was like building steam-cars and building the best steam-car you could possibly ever do — then someone comes along and says, 'We have gasoline that works a little bit better.' Now it's completely upended."

Oh, and what of Cassian Andor himself? "He's a man fully committed to the Rebellion," says Luna about how we find him when the second season starts. "It's someone who has to ascend. There's a huge mountain for him to climb in order to [become] the guy we meet in *Rogue One*." And Cassian has two big reunions, of a sort.

First, with his lifelong confidant, Rebel contact Bix Caleen (Adria Arjona), who, having been captured and tortured, is rescued at the end of the first season and is, presumably, flown away to safety. "They've known each other their whole lives," says Gilroy on the Cassian and Bix relationship. "They're probably their first kiss. They're probably their first sex. I hope people are really curious about what happens with the two of them."

"They definitely do reunite," says Arjona. "When you imagine what these two characters can go through, just remember that Tony Gilroy wrote it. So, it's *way* more complex than my personal imagination — knowing this character and knowing the story — could have ever comprehended. She's incredibly fucked up by Doctor Gorst," an Imperial (played by Joshua James) who, in Season 1, tortured Bix with the sounds of dying Dizonites, which seems rather unpleasant. "The fact that she survived that is a huge triumph. She's definitely not perfect, but she's definitely not as fucked up as we saw her at the end of Season 1."

Cassian will also meet his droid pal from *Rogue One*, Alan Tudyk's K-2SO. That may not quite go how you expect. As Luna explains, "From an audience perspective, they've probably made their own story about how Cassian and K-2 got to work together,

Clockwise from main: Ben Mendelsohn rocks the white cape again as Orson Krennic; A tender moment for Bix Caleen (Adria Arjona) and Andor; The complicated Rael; Dedra on alert.

right? Well, we are going to challenge that. After knowing how important this relationship is and the chemistry they have, where does all that humour come out? It tells you a lot about Cassian that his best friend is a droid. And a droid he had to reprogramme. But how did that actually happen and who was he before? Those questions are going to be answered."

Andor had a mountain to climb, then. And behind the scenes, so did the cast and crew. A much bigger one than they'd expected.

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"Our guardrails were economic," says Gilroy of Season 2. "Our limitations were economic and availability and production issues and Covid... and a strike."

During the filming of this logistically complicated second season, first the Writers Guild went on strike, then the Screen Actors Guild followed suit. Ironically, the challenges of Covid would go on to limit the amount of time lost to the strikes. During the pandemic, Gilroy and his team of writers would hammer down each script — Gilroy uses the phrase "beat the shit out of it" — until it was perfect. By the time the scripts were being filmed, they were done. "I finished the last script — not by design, by coincidence — a week before the Writers Guild strike was called. They had as much me as they needed to go forward and continue. Nothing needed to be changed." Which means production was not halted until the SAG downed tools a couple of months later, and by then, most of what needed to be filmed was already complete.

"We were filming during the writers' strike and it was a big bummer," says Arjona. "I rely a lot on Tony as a soundboard and he really is the biggest hype man when it comes to difficult scenes. You'll always get a text message from him being like, 'You got this. I believe in you.' And I missed that." To that point, Arjona calls herself "the queen of paraphrasing" on other projects, but doesn't dare change a line or punctuation in an *Andor* script.

"Listen, you have to have somebody with a vision," says Denise Gough, citing chaotic productions where ten people are all in charge, all with different points of view. The rest of the cast all seem to agree that Gilroy was very much the boss, had a plan, and trusted where things were going. Mendelsohn succinctly sums it all up. "The guy made *Michael Clayton*, come on — it's the best fucking film."

Andor might have similar aspirations. Remember how this second season will be divided into four "blocks", or four separate films? Gilroy sees it a little differently. "To me it's like we made *eight* movies in five years," he says of their work on both seasons. "That's how *I* think of it."

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What will *Andor*'s legacy be? We'll have to wait and see this final season, but it seems like it's on its way to being something that's forever special.

"How are they going to fly us all in to land? They do. They fucking do," says Gough. "If Season 1 was a set-up, Season 2 is a juggernaut — it's extraordinary, the swings it takes," says O'Reilly, before adding, ominously: "Tony doesn't let them off the hook."

"I was like, 'Tony, can we not do another season?'" says Arjona of her own experience.

Throughout our interviews, Gilroy and the cast point out that viewers don't have to know anything about *Star Wars* to watch *Andor*. Gilroy has one regret, though, that he'd love to navigate before this all wraps up. "I was surprised it hasn't translated exactly into widening the audience for people who are *Star Wars*-averse," he says. "That, it hasn't done. That's our goal this time." Because Gilroy felt a real connection to this audience, and he hopes that spreads. "There's somebody out there listening and you don't always feel that way. You don't always know somebody is listening."

Perhaps Mendelsohn sums it up best. "This season is..." He makes a loud grunt and then performs a chef's kiss motion. "You'll have a good time transcribing that noise."

In an era of inconsistent 'content' surrounding IP, *Andor* has the chance to be remembered as a true vision with defined storytelling, filmmaking and acting. As we know, it's a dark time for the Rebellion — but it's a pretty terrific time for *Andor*.

A new Falcon (Danny Ramirez) and new Cap (Anthony Mackie) head into action.

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD

OUT 14 FEB

STEVE ROGERS? OLD NEWS. AND THERE'S NO TIME FOR NOSTALGIA

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN IS THE FALCON NOT THE FALCON? When he's Captain America, of course. Since his MCU debut in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Anthony Mackie's Sam Wilson has been Steve Rogers' wingman, literally and figuratively. But, following the events of *Avengers: Endgame* and 2021 TV outing *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*, Wilson has received the ultimate upgrade, inheriting Steve Rogers' unbreakable shield and the mantle of Captain America.

It's a brave new world, alright. And to help Wilson navigate increasingly murky geopolitical waters, filled with all kinds of wild threats, he needs some familiarity. Captain America needs a Falcon. So all hail Joaquín Torres (Danny Ramirez), Sam's sidekick in *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*, who takes to the skies in *Captain America: Brave New World*. "There's this incredible big brother/little brother dynamic between them," says director Julius Onah. "It's is going to be one of the key emotional centres of the film."

Given that Sam Wilson has retained his wingsuit, having two heroes who can rack up the air miles allows Onah to spread *Brave New World*'s wings, geographically speaking. "We are going around the world and back," says Onah. "What I love about a great political thriller is the ripples. You start with what seems like a small, centralised situation, and it builds and grows weightier. As Sam uncovers the mystery, it takes him around the world."

That mystery will revolve around uncovering the mastermind behind an attempt on the life of the new President of the United States, one General Thaddeus 'Thunderbolt' Ross (Harrison Ford, replacing the late William Hurt, who had played Ross in the MCU since 2008's *The Incredible Hulk*). This will take Sam and Joaquín to Washington D.C., to Japan, and to the humongous corpse of the Celestial Tiamut, who was last seen erupting out of the earth in *Eternals*, and has now become a landmark known as Celestial Island. It's here where Wilson and Torres can be seen in our exclusive pic, boat-bound before all hell breaks loose. "That will be part of what I think is going to be a really fun, exciting sequence," says Onah. "We've never had two winged heroes like this, up in the air, flying together, working together against some pretty wild circumstances."

Those wild circumstances, it has now been confirmed, will include the transformation of President Ross into the gamma-irradiated powerhouse known as Red Hulk, a super-strong behemoth who might be the worst thing to happen to the White House since [insert President name here, depending on your political leanings]. Ross is sure to provide a robust challenge for the new Captain America and Falcon. Neither of whom possess any superpowers or special abilities. "These guys are incredible fighters," says Onah. "And Sam has been there and back. He's got some tricks up his sleeve, and over the course of the film there are things he comes to learn that become other tools in his arsenal, when he's facing even the most impossible of threats."

Hope so — we just got a new Captain America and Falcon; it's far too soon to even contemplate needing replacements.

Young dragon-wrangler Hiccup (Mason Thames) is ready for (live) action.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

UNLIKELY HERO HICCUP IS READY FOR HIS LIVE-ACTION GLOW-UP

OUT JUN

IT'S NOT EASY to take a beloved animated character and successfully replicate it in the real world. Especially when it's a scrappy, inky, cat-like dragon with oversized eyes.

This challenge has been weighing on filmmaker Dean DeBlois, who is bringing Toothless, from his *How To Train Your Dragon* trilogy, into a live-action remake of the first film. "People have made wrong calls in [other] films," he says carefully, before adding with a chuckle, "If you arbitrarily change the design of a character, the world will let you know they're unhappy."

Since 2010, the *How To Train Your Dragon* franchise has followed wayward teen Hiccup and his adventures with Toothless in the fictional Viking village of Berk and beyond, the series garnering a diehard fanbase. "Hiccup represents all of the oddballs out there, and there are many of us," DeBlois says of the *Dragon* lovers.

The new iteration of Hiccup will be played by *The Black Phone*'s Mason Thames. "There was a bit of awkwardness, but also a vulnerability to him which [came] with the fact that he was 15 when we were auditioning him," DeBlois remembers. Of course, though, Hiccup is only half the story: this film lives and dies by the relationship with his winged pal, and so to ensure that Thames and his co-stars had plenty to work with, intricate puppets were built for the shoot, as stand-ins for the VFX to come. DeBlois recalls recreating a sequence in which Hiccup is supposed to overpower Toothless in front of his fearful village. "It's so dialled-up in terms of stakes — having a fully credible, photo-real dragon stomping around trying to kill him," he says.

DeBlois didn't, though, throw the dragon out with the bathwater when it came to revisiting those memorable moments from the animated film: this film aims to tread familiar ground while also very much breaking it. Not toothless at all. **BETH WEBB**

Pierce Brosnan as former trade-union activist Ron, with director Chris Columbus behind the lens.

THE THURSDAY MURDER CLUB

CRIME-SOLVING PENSIONERS UNITE FOR A VERY BRITISH MYSTERY

OUT TBC

WHEN CHRIS Columbus first read Richard Osman's 2020 bestseller *The Thursday Murder Club*, he failed the highest test of reading crime fiction: he didn't work out whodunnit. "Richard had me completely fooled," the director laughs. "I find it depends on the quality of the book. If it's really strong, I never guess."

For the nine people who haven't read it, *The Thursday Murder Club* follows four friends — ex-spy Elizabeth (Helen Mirren), ex-psychiatrist Ibrahim (Sir Ben Kingsley), fiery former trade-union activist Ron (Pierce Brosnan) and ex-nurse Joyce (Celia Imrie) — who solve cold cases for fun in the retirement home of Cooper's Chase. Then, as sure as Midsomer means murder, the gang are pulled into a real-life mystery involving the death of a local property developer.

"Most murder-mysteries are either cold and procedural or, in certain cases, really over-the-top," explains Columbus of the appeal. "These are elderly people facing their own mortality, who, at the same time, are trying to solve murders. They're dealing with their own potential death by studying death. It's the only murder-mystery I can think of that has an intensely complex, emotional quality."

From writing *Young Sherlock Holmes* to directing the first two *Harry Potter* adventures, Columbus is well versed in UK pop culture, and he needs to be: Osman's novel weaves in a welter of British references from *Homes Under The Hammer* to Sainsbury's Taste The Difference range. Columbus is acutely aware this tang needs to be retained. "In America, the *Harry Potter* books changed 'jumpers' to 'sweaters', 'trainers' became 'sneakers'," he recalls. "None of that's been changed for Richard's book."

A high-stakes thriller involving Sainsbury's Taste The Difference. Who could ask for anything more? **IAN FREER**

BRIDGET JONES: MAD ABOUT THE BOY

OUT 14 FEB

RENÉE ZELLWEGER ON BRINGING BACK BRIDGET... AND ON HOW MUCH SHE'D MISSED HER

WORDS **TERRI WHITE**

After *Bridget Jones's Baby*, was there already a commitment to this fourth film?
Well, you can't do anything just to do it, right? But I love her, you know. I *love* this character. It's such a unique experience to have the opportunity to revisit a character, to get to know her, in a different stage of her life as she evolves and grows. I feel great warmth for her. I'm also really protective over her, and so the quality of the project is always at the forefront.

Do you have a process for bringing you back to the skin, to the spirit, of Bridget?
I feel like she exists in the middle of a collection of us [including filmmakers and author Helen Fielding]. So, when I'm immersed within that circle again, I feel reconnected. Obviously, there's the dialect work to get back into that habit. And then things are closer immediately because I don't usually walk around, you know, using my Britishisms...

You totally should. Do you miss Bridget when you're not her?
Oh, yeah, absolutely. I mean, there are parts of this character that a lot of people relate to, and I share that. I relate to so much about her that I feel like she's always sort of lingering. I feel her in my awkwardness sometimes, and I think of her when I'm having one of those out-of-body experiences where you're kind of watching yourself talk and thinking, "Just shut your mouth. Just stop talking. Okay, now stop talking. Now: stop talking. Okay. Just stop now." So, I feel like there are parts of Bridget that travel with me — and it's usually the awkwardness and those moments of, I don't know, public humiliation that we all relate to.

This is the first film without Mark Darcy and without Colin Firth on set. Quite the change...
Oh, no spoilers! But it's so peculiar because of the connection to this character I've come to love. I love him. I love this person that Colin plays when we get together again. And I was heartbroken. It was such a peculiar thing to be heartbroken that a fictional character is gone from your life, [but I've] gotten to know him since 2000. And of course, Colin, he's an integral part of that experience, and to not share it with him... I won't lie. I shed some tears. It's just, I guess, like life. Part of the magic just disappears.

But once again the creative team has some new members, including director Michael Morris, whose first film was *To Leslie*. And is — gasp! — a man. Did this refresh the Bridget Jones Cinematic Universe?
I love that, I might have to steal it from you... Obviously, there's going to be a different

Left: Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) enters a new chapter of her life. **Below:** With newbie character Mr Wallaker, played by Chiwetel Ejiofor.

creative perspective and way of looking at the narrative, and stylistically, his choices are going to be different. And like you said, he's a fella! So, yeah, I was scared at first. But I had met Michael several years ago socially: I know his wife [actor Mary McCormack], and we have mutual friends. He's a gentleman, a kind person, and such a gifted director. He set the tone at work every day and folks would go above and beyond for him, because he was so kind and supportive and appreciative of what everybody had to bring to the table. And he entrusted his crew to do what they're great at, you know? And that just made for a wonderful experience for everybody. There was so much joy on the set, and I attribute that to how he works. I felt very lucky to be doing this with him.

Speaking of joy, the comedy of the films has always been so well done. The writing, but also your physical comedy. When you summon Bridget, does it return?
That describes the experience of it perfectly. There are certain things about her, the way she carries herself, she walks differently than I do. So I immediately feel her again when I emulate that posture, her stance and the way she walks. And there's a purity, an innocence to her. Her heart is right there, and it's ebullient with goodness. I love imagining what that looks like again and again. It's so joyful as a performer to play in that space. That's one of the other things that I love so much about the Bridget Universe, as you describe it — the opportunity to see what falling off a bike looks like for Bridget or going through the busy streets. What does that look like when you are just *not* killing it?

Are you surprised by the grip Bridget still has on culture? Boris Johnson wrote a newspaper column with a Bridget Jones reference, and everyone piled in on social media when he got it wrong...
There's a parallel experience where I meet people and we share a laugh about a particular moment within the Bridget Universe, and that's continued for 24 years. I smiled that Boris Johnson had seen the film at all...

Above: Assassin Eve Macarro (Ana de Armas) with hotel concierge Charon (Lance Reddick) and manager Winston (Ian McShane). **Left:** Macarro hits the light fantastic.

BALLERINA

GET READY FOR ANA DE ARMAS' RIP-ROARING RAMPAGE OF REVENGE

OUT 06 JUN

DING! THERE'S A NEW ARRIVAL AT THE NEW York Continental, and Ana de Armas' fledgling assassin Eve Macarro is definitely travelling for business, not pleasure. The long-awaited first cinematic spin-off for the *John Wick* universe is, says director Len Wiseman, "less of an expansion and more a new dimension on that world", with a hero who's trying to get into the assassination business just as determinedly as Keanu Reeves' John Wick is trying to get out.

This all takes place concurrently with 2019's third film, *Parabellum*. We meet Eve on a personal mission of revenge after losing her father as a child. She's taken advice from her teacher (Sharon Duncan-Brewster) that the best way to take down an assassin is to become one herself — which is why she's checking in at the Continental, meeting Lance Reddick's concierge Charon ("a wonderful man, a good egg," remembers Wiseman, sadly, of Reddick. "This will be his last film") and Ian McShane's hotel manager Winston, and seeking advice from Wick himself.

"It's a search for family as well as a quest for revenge," says Wiseman of what goes down. "There's a little bit of wish-fulfilment within revenge-fantasy stories, but also an element of self-discovery. And it's diving a little deeper into the Ruska Roma and how that works," he continues, referencing the High Table's criminal organisation, involving Anjelica Huston's Director, who also returns.

Eve's name, Macarro, is close to the Spanish word for "to bruise", which will be the least of the injuries Eve's inflicting here: as with this year's *Abigail*, this film won't stint on action just because there's a girl with tutu training in the lead. Wiseman took inspiration from the rigour and discipline of ballet dancers, and their ability to keep moving gracefully through intense pain. "That translates into fighting, too. This is actor-based action; that's what makes the whole *Wick* franchise special, and what I've always appreciated about it. It's not just cool action; you have Ana's performance within that. It gives the audience much more involvement and release when something happens."

The film has taken more than seven years to go from script to screen, with a significant delay since the original shoot in late 2022. But in Wiseman's account, there was good reason to go back for more filming earlier this year, for which *Wick* overlord Chad Stahelski was involved. "It wasn't reshoots; [it was] additional photography," explains Wiseman. "We got more money to put in some scenes that we had to cut from the script due to budget constraints, and then just to have more fun."

With newcomers like Norman Reedus as the mysterious Pine and Gabriel Byrne as the sinister Chancellor, fun shouldn't be in short supply. Just don't get between this woman and her pointe shoes. **HELEN O'HARA**

HAVOC

OUT TBC

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING, BUT GARETH EVANS' BONE-CRUNCHING EPIC IS NEARLY READY TO KICK OUR FACE IN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, GARETH Evans' *HAVOC* would have been part of *Empire*'s 2022 Preview. After all, Evans began shooting the movie in 2021, with a view to releasing it the following year. But that's the thing about the world: it's far from ideal. 2022 came and went, with no sign of the movie on Netflix's release docket. So did 2023. And then 2024 joined the party. "It's been an adventure," understates Evans. "It was a perfect storm of things."

The CliffsNotes version: additional photography was required on the movie. But, not being an MCU movie, a window hadn't been built into the overall schedule. So it took a while to get all the players — principally the film's lead, Tom Hardy, a strong contender for busiest man in movies — to align their schedules. Then there were a couple of strikes. You might have heard of them. Finally — *finally* — Evans was able to roll cameras again in Wales earlier this year. "Everyone was a great sport, came back and gave it their all," he says. "It's had a profound effect on the film. It allowed me to better streamline it, and make it what it was always intended to be, which is a blistering, fast-paced action-thriller with nods to the Hong Kong cinema that I grew up watching."

Mouthwatering words. *HAVOC* would seem to be exactly the film that people might think of when they hear the words "Gareth Evans, Tom Hardy, action movie". When Evans returned to Wales from Indonesia, where he made his name as one of the most innovative and exciting action directors around thanks to the one-two punch-kick-stab-slice-kick-and-punch-again of *The Raid* and *The Raid 2*, the air of anticipation surrounding his next move was palpable. Would he deliver an action movie to match the two all-timers he had made overseas?

No, is the short answer. Instead, Evans made *Apostle*, a deliberately obtuse, deeply personal movie in which he "tortured Dan Stevens across two hours of folk horror". He delivered great big dollops of his trademark, intensely choreographed action in the first season of *Gangs Of London*, including a standalone farmhouse-set episode which may well have contained the best action set-pieces seen on screen in 2020. *HAVOC* finally gives him a chance to flex those muscles at feature length. "When it comes to

Left: Detective Walker (Tom Hardy) fights his way through the criminal underworld.
Below: With cop Ellie (Jessie Mei Li).

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

a film called *HAVOC*, with me and Tom Hardy, we deliver on the action front," he says. "That's the primary focus. But with Tom, what you get as well is an intensely muscular central performance, and really well-developed character. There's a lot going on under the hood."

That character is Walker (yes, Evans knows Lee Marvin in *Point Blank* shares the same name), a cop-on-the-edge in an unnamed American city who is given an onerous task by Forest Whitaker's mayor, two nights before Christmas: find his son, who's in way over his head, before other interested parties, including the Triads, cops (corrupt) and other cops (non-corrupt) find him. "He's basically on clean-up duty," explains Evans, "and he has to navigate this broken city in order to get to him first. That's the propulsive mission he goes on, and because it's me, it doesn't go well for a long time."

In collaboration with his regular team of DP Matt Flannery and action designer/stunt coordinator Jude Poyer, Evans has come up with "a couple of barnstormer sequences". There's a shootout he describes as "the farmhouse scene from *Gangs* on steroids", and an extraordinarily intense siege-turned-massacre in a fishing shack. When *Empire* visited the movie's set in 2021, that set was still standing, and was liberally festooned with fake body-parts and blood. "That's very much me riffing on the influences I've taken from John Woo and Sam Peckinpah," says Evans.

Another standout set-piece involves a showdown-cum-shootout, for which Walker and virtually all interested parties converge upon a busy nightclub. Evans had it built to exacting specifications in a Cardiff soundstage. "That was me at my most self-indulgent," he laughs. "We needed somewhere we could have control over, and a mezzanine floor that wraps around the whole nightclub. And then I decided we should have a glass floor, because I wanted to do a gag where the camera would go under the floor. It's a big set-piece that just goes and goes and then spills out into the streets."

In the *Raid* movies, Evans' lead was his discovery Iko Uwais, who appeared on the screen as a fully formed martial-arts maestro, hands and feet moving at a constant and dizzying rate of knots. Hardy is no stranger to action — this is the guy who broke Batman's back, after all — but he's not as nimble and lithe as Uwais, something Evans took into account when designing the action. You mustn't be afraid to dream a little bigger, darling. "Tom has this fascination with jiu-jitsu, and studies that intensely," explains Evans, who gave the actor a laundry list of movies to watch in preparation for the movie, including *The French Connection*, plus more 'heroic-bloodshed' movies than you could shake a dove at. "And he bulked up for this. His physicality was unreal. We were factoring that into the choreography, and we gave him a brawling style. There's almost a weird nihilism to the way that he approaches the action and the violence in the movie."

It's been a slog for Evans. There's no question about that. But now this long journey is nearly over, he's "really excited for people to have a chance to see what we've been up to". Unleash you-know-what.

SPINAL TAP II

THE WORLD'S MOST ACCIDENT-PRONE ROCKERS ARE BACK. LET'S BOOGIE!

OUT TBC

THEIR DRUMMER EXPLODED. Their Stonehenge was tiny. They even got lost backstage in Cleveland. But none of this could stop the titular band in beloved 1984 rock-spoof *This Is Spinal Tap* from putting on a show. And now, *Spinal Tap II* will demonstrate what happens when a reunion concert puts Nigel Tufnel (Christopher Guest), David St. Hubbins (Michael McKean) and Derek Smalls (Harry Shearer) on the same stage again, after years in the wilderness.

"Nigel has been running a cheese and guitar shop," explains returning director Rob Reiner. "David has been writing music for a true-crime podcast called 'The Trouble With Murder'. And Derek is the curator of a museum of glue. He's also written a symphony about the fact that the devil wears a bad hairpiece. It's called 'Hell Toupée'."

Reiner himself is in front of the camera again as filmmaker Marty DiBergi, director of the likes of 'Kramer Vs. Kramer Vs. Godzilla'. "He couldn't even get commercials anymore," says Reiner. "So he's been teaching as an assistant at the Ed Wood School of Cinematic Arts. When he hears they're going to do another concert, he asks if he can document it."

The comedy sequel will be packed with cameos from the likes of Paul McCartney, Elton John and Metallica's Lars Ulrich; few movies are as popular with actual musicians as *Spinal Tap*. And Reiner promises brand-new Tap songs, including 'Rockin' In The Urn', a Derek Smalls original: "It's all about the fact that even after he's dead, he's still going to be performing."

If fans are concerned that Tap might have gotten any more professional over the years, Reiner's here to allay those fears. "There's a line in the movie where a concert promoter says, 'I was fascinated by seeing a group of people that over the years have not evolved either musically or personally.'" Go to 11? *Tap II* might just turn things up to 12.

NICK DE SEMLYEN

JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH

OUT JUL

HAVING ALREADY WRANGLED GODZILLA, DIRECTOR GARETH EDWARDS IS NOW GOING DINO-SIZED. PREPARE FOR PROPER PREHYSTERIA

WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

GARETH EDWARDS KNOWS HIS monsters. His debut film, which featured pylon-sized, tentacled aliens, was literally titled *Monsters*. Then he tackled *Godzilla*, stomp-starting a franchise now known as the MonsterVerse. So when he tells *Empire* he's been "secretly" wanting to make a film like *Jurassic World Rebirth* since he was 12 years old, we feel obliged to question his use of the adverb. "Yeah, I don't think it's much of a secret, if you watch my other films," he concedes. "I think I came out a long time ago."

Of course, now he's dealing with a very particular kind of beast. One that requires special handling. "There's something kind of mythical about dinosaurs, yet real, you know?" he says when we catch up with him just a few weeks after he's wrapped the shoot, now in the thick of assembling his cut. "The fact that they really did exist means you can't dismiss them as a threat. When other films try to scare you, you can fob them off and say, 'Well, there's no such thing as monsters.' But there's something very primal about dinosaurs, because we're mammals with millions of years of embedded instinct that tells us some giant creature at some point is going to chase us and try and kill us. So it feels instantly relatable."

Where Godzilla was tougher to sell as a specific threat to the lead characters in that movie, Edwards explains, dinosaurs present an immediate, viscerally direct peril. So if *Godzilla* needed to be more of a disaster movie, this one allows him to make "an action horror, of sorts". Much like, he points out, the original *Jurassic Park*.

Given that Spielberg's groundbreaking film is one of Edwards' all-time favourites, something he goes back to again and again for inspiration, he didn't require much convincing to take on its sixth sequel. Though it certainly helped that he was instantly impressed by *Jurassic Park* writer David Koepp's script for this new instalment. "It goes back to what I loved about the original," Edwards says, "with an embarrassment of riches of different set-piece-type scenarios and tense, fun action moments. There were a lot of opportunities as a filmmaker to have a lot of fun and try and play games with the audience."

While Edwards is clearly harking back to the original (even shooting on 35mm film for the first time in his career), this will be "a whole new chapter in the timeline of *Jurassic*", which blends elements of the mission movie with some classic 'monster island' antics. Set five years after the dino-unleashing events of *Jurassic World Dominion*, it kicks off in a world which, for the most part, has proven unsuitable as a saurian habitat, with the great beasts retreating to equatorial regions. It is here that a crack team of specialists — picking

Left: Zora Bennett (Scarlett Johansson) on covert operations. **Below:** Duncan Kincaid (Mahershala Ali) flares up.

up a shipwrecked family along the way — must track down and gather DNA from three of the chonkiest species, for the benefit of humanity (and, more immediately, a big pharmaceutical company).

It's too early for Edwards to reveal which species will appear, but he does confirm it will be a mix of old favourites and fresh meat. "There are new things in the film that I'm really excited about," he says, choosing his words carefully, "but equally there are certain dinosaurs it would be a crime against cinema not to include. Hopefully, it's a good combination."

What he can say more about is the person leading the hunt for this colossal quarry, namely Scarlett Johansson as covert-operations expert Zora Bennett. "She's looking for meaning in her life after leaving the military," says Edwards, "and this opportunity comes along where [after it] basically she'd never have to work again. But through that journey, she starts to question the ethical rights and wrongs of what they're doing." The character, he adds, was not gender-specific in the script, so could have been played by anyone. But at the first mention of her name, he knew it had to be Johansson. "In the first-ever meeting I had with Universal and Steven Spielberg, Steven mentioned how he'd once met Scarlett and she'd been super-keen to be in a *Jurassic* film. As soon as I heard that I thought, 'That's the end of the meeting, right? Are you going to call her, or shall I?' Thankfully, she was totally up for it."

And being "totally up for it" meant a willingness to slog through "really extreme conditions", including real jungles, mangrove swamps and mountains in Thailand, as well as being "thrown into the ocean". But fortunately Edwards isn't the only one who feels he's living the *Jurassic* dream. "Most actors would have walked off set, given the circumstances," he says, but Johansson and her fellow cast (including Mahershala Ali, Jonathan Bailey and Rupert Friend) "doubled down, because they were so excited to be in *Jurassic*."

If you're gonna be shocked, awed and possibly eaten by monsters, it seems, you still can't do better than dinosaurs.

Above: Elio (Yonas Kibreab) goes for a ride with OOOOO (Shirley Henderson). **Left:** Glordon's alive! Concept art of Elio with his alien pal, voiced in the film by Remy Edgerly.

ELIO

HERE'S WHY WE'RE HYPED FOR PIXAR'S OUTER-SPACE ADVENTURE

OUT 13 JUN

IT'S A RARE PIXAR SCI-FI

When Pixar goes sci-fi, you have a chance of getting *WALL•E*. (We'll forget *Lightyear* for now.) *Elio* promises a similarly sweet intergalactic outing. The titular kid is "this little boy who feels like an alien on Earth", explains director Madeline Sharafian. When he's beamed to the 'Communiverse', the galactic ambassadors assume Elio to be Earth's leader. "His sense of loneliness is the heart of the movie, wanting so desperately to be wanted," Sharafian says. "It's propelling him through lying about who he is, in order to fit into this amazing alien world."

IT'S THE RETURN OF DOMEE SHI

The director of *Bao* and *Turning Red* is back, directing alongside Sharafian — this time, on a film that isn't so tightly tied to her own experience. It's still personal though. "I feel such a strong connection with the story and the character, even though he's not directly a reflection of myself," Shi says. Sharafian and Shi took over from original director Adrian Molina, who left to work on another Pixar project — but he's still in the mix. "It's been great figuring out what parts of myself I can put in [Elio]," says Shi, "and what parts of Maddie and Adrian, shaping this character to feel like a reflection of all of us."

IT'S FULL OF ALIEN ODDBALLS

In space, Elio will encounter Weird Little Guys galore. Like Helix, a "puffy dignitary" who "always has a glass of Glorp on hand, the official drink of the Communiverse", laughs Sharafian. And that's just the beginning. "It's really fun to play with the ambassador characters, because their designs are so crazy," says Shi. "Some don't even have faces to emote. How do you do a run cycle [movement guide] on a character with no legs?"

IT'S GOT OOOOO

…Yes, OOOOO. Pronounced "oooh". She's a liquid supercomputer who'll aid Elio in his Communiverse adventure — voiced by Shirley Henderson, who has form in this arena having given life to *Star Wars* oddity Babu Frik. "We have a whole collection of weird Shirley noises that we get to plug in whenever we want them, that all fit the character perfectly," beams Sharafian. "She's so creative. It's always that little edge of weird, it's not just cute."

IT'S NODDING TO *THE THING*

You know, John Carpenter's *The Thing*. With the spider-head, and the arm-chomping defibrillation scene, and a flamethrowing Kurt Russell. Cute as *Elio* looks, Sharafian promises "some sci-fi horror references" — citing *Alien*, "the scary parts" of *Close Encounters*, and Carpenter's icy terror. "It's one of our best surprises, so I don't want to give away too much," she teases. "I'm always trying to push it to be weirder and a little creepier, to ride that line of the PG movie." Beam us up.

BEN TRAVIS

OUT 01 JAN

WE LIVE IN TIME

FLORENCE PUGH ON PERFECT CHEMISTRY AND PERFECT EGGS

WORDS **ELLA KEMP**

***We Live in Time* pairs you with Andrew Garfield, as a couple experiencing big changes. What was the main appeal?**
I've always wanted to do a romantic movie. I wanted to do something that mattered, something that was going to reflect people in the current day. I always hope that people will see a part of themselves in [my] characters, but I also play a lot of characters from different eras. I got to represent a young woman who had drive, wanted to be successful and wanted to *work*. She wanted to have a career, and nothing was going to get in her way of that — which is like every single woman I know. There was also the conversation about whether or not you should have a child, and that juggle of [wanting to] have a career [too]. I was really excited to play a woman that I could recognise, my friends could recognise, my siblings could recognise.

Choices surrounding women's reproductive health are at the heart of the film, but don't monopolise it. With it being a two-hander, how do you prepare to explore that on screen?
When you are telling a story about things we can all draw upon, you have to be hugely careful and respectful of the other person's process, and that's something that [Andrew Garfield and I] were both very good at doing for one another. In terms of the reproductive parts of her story, I didn't keep them close to me, because it's also *their* story. Almut actually invites [Garfield's character] Tobias in. She invites him to join her on this decision.

As the movie got further along, this pretend life we were making was getting so big that I was never scared or intimidated to do any scene with [Andrew], because he could catch me wherever I would push things. After shooting certain moments, we'd stay in the room and just hold each other,

Top to bottom: Parents-to-be-very-soon Almut (Florence Pugh) and Tobias (Andrew Garfield); With daughter Ella (Grace Delaney); Garfield and Pugh talk to director John Crowley on set.

have a cry and process how that made us feel and why that [broke] us in certain ways.

The bond you share makes it feel like Almut and Tobias are the only two people in the world. How did you achieve that with your intimacy coordinator, Ita O'Brien?
I was paranoid it would get in the way, but Ita is brilliant. What she opened the conversation for was that there are different types of sex in every relationship. And it wasn't just sex scenes: it's communication between bodies, intimacy between two people and how that [manifests] in different ways. I have always been passionate about making sex scenes that feel real. I am dedicated to showing women in that state, seeing pleasure and being naked and being comfortable, because it's important to be seen in the correct way on screen. Ita [opened] up this whole other version of [watching] a couple and making sure it's something we will recognise. She was also there for the birth scene and worked with our midwife, Penny [Taylor]. Ita noticed tiny things: when I put my neck back and Andrew put his face on my cheek, she'd say, "Keep that, the way you're exposing your neck in such a tender way." I need someone to tell me that these things we're doing are great.

We have such a rich history of British love stories on screen. Now you've created one of your own, what would you say are the key ingredients?
It's our weird, dry, sarcastic humour. It's our delicious awkwardness. Obviously the script is funny, but those two *people* are funny. They always say something funny when something bad has happened, and that's the way I also am in my relationships. We find humour in the darkest of places, because that's the only thing that we can call upon. And it actually does help. There is nothing technically funny about what happens, yet it's because you fall in love with these people who need that to survive. They need love and laughter; it's okay to laugh in those moments, it's actually needed. They're allowed to find joy in little things, because that's how we are as humans. That's how we are as Brits.

Almut is a brilliant chef, and passes on her particular talent with eggs to her family. What's your favourite egg recipe to cook for a loved one?
I make a really, really good shakshuka with a crispy fried egg on the top. It's so wholesome. You get a bit of stale, crusty bread and pop it in the toaster and wipe some garlic on it, and it does make people feel loved.

Here: Dodging Cupid: Ke Huy Quan as Marvin Gable. **Below, left to right:** Seeing double; Quan takes direction from Jonathan Eusebio.

LOVE HURTS

KE HUY QUAN BRINGS THE PAIN OUT 07 FEB

WORKING WITH KE HUY QUAN ON ACTION-comedy *Love Hurts*, debutant director Jonathan Eusebio had to work super-hard to suppress his inner geek. "I grew up on *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* and *The Goonies*," he admits, "but I tried to separate that out and concentrate on our movie. It's always nice to work with someone you admire and realise they're just as nice, good people as you have in your head."

Rather than for childhood nostalgia reasons, Eusebio cast Quan after watching him give acceptance speeches all over town for his Oscar-winning turn as Waymond Wang in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. "Watching him through awards season, I was just thinking 'Man, this guy is charming. Everyone loves him,'" says Eusebio. "As I was reading our script, I just felt he embodied this character. We just tried to cater the script for Ke and crossed our fingers."

In his first lead role, Quan plays Marvin Gable, a happy, carefree real-estate agent whose previous life as a cold-blooded killer comes back to haunt him when his crime-boss brother (Daniel Wu) sends some henchmen to dish out payback for a double-cross. Cue *mano a mano* mayhem that transforms serene suburban settings into war zones.

"When I first read it, I just liked the fact that you have this unassuming hero and then you find out he's not who you think he is," says Eusebio. "I grew up watching Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao movies. In my head, I just thought I could mould this story around that genre."

In crafting the film's action, Eusebio wanted the "fight scenes to coincide with Marvin's emotional journey. In the beginning they are a little bit more playful, but as his past returns, things get a little bit more brutal." As a stunt coordinator, Eusebio has trained Keanu Reeves, Matt Damon and Jason Statham in hand-to-hand combat, and in Quan, an action choreographer on 2000's *X-Men* and 2001 Jet Li film *The One*, he had the perfect sparring partner.

"What makes it great is he's doing almost 100 per cent of the action scenes," says the director. "You need a very physical, capable actor who understands how to perform for the camera. We could do long takes. You can change up the rhythm. He knew the language. I was very lucky to have him."

Also in the fray is *West Side Story* Oscar-winner Ariana DeBose as Marvin's former cohort-in-crime, Rose ("I think you needed someone who could keep Ke's character on his toes"), but fundamentally *Love Hurts* is designed as a coronation for Quan's comeback. "I really wanted to showcase Ke's range as an actor," says Eusebio. "You see all these layers to him that you haven't seen before: comedic, serious, emotional. I think people will be very surprised." In other words, we'll will see everything, everywhere, all at once.

IAN FREER

OUT 17 JAN

WOL

HAVING REINVENTED THE INVISIBLE MAN, LEIGH WHANNELL IS NOW TACKLING A HAIRIER MONSTER. *EMPIRE* GOES FERAL ON SET...

WORDS **AMON WARMANN**

LEIGH WHANNELL WAS ADRIFT. FOR years he'd worked and worked — significantly on the *Saw* and *Insidious* franchises, as writer, director and actor — before making 2018's action sci-fi *Upgrade*. But after his modern revamp of 2020's *The Invisible Man* — and the small matter of a global pandemic — he had hit a wall.

"I have a young family, so that discombobulation of Covid kind of joined forces with this blank slate, and it led to a form of creative paralysis where you're not quite sure what's the right idea to go with," he tells *Empire*. "It was a strange time."

Enter: *Wolf Man*. While he was in artistic limbo, Blumhouse approached Whannell to see if he was keen to modernise another Universal monster, this one much hairier and more visible than his last. But the filmmaker was hesitant. "At first I thought, 'Well, I just did *Invisible Man*. I don't think I want to do *Wolf Man*.'" Ultimately, though, that resistance didn't last. "I came up with an idea of how I would do *Wolf Man*, and it took hold. I couldn't stop thinking about it. At the risk of sounding pretentious, the projects choose you a lot of the time."

There have been many werewolf movies over the years, not least George Waggner's original *The Wolf Man* in 1941, all of them building on supernatural-horror tropes in their own way. If Whannell was going to take on the challenge, he would strive for something truly innovative. And the idea that he proposed was a bold twist.

"My thought was — 'What if I slowed [the transformation] down? And what if the person who was transforming didn't know it was happening?' I couldn't stop thinking about this idea that you were seeing the change from the perspective of the person who's changing."

LF MAN

Most transformations in werewolf movies showcase a human metamorphosing into a feral beast in short order. Whannell's slow-burn is uniquely terrifying for his characters — the soon-to-be-beastly Blake (Christopher Abbott), his wife Charlotte (Julia Garner), and their daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth) — to deal with, as their family retreat in Oregon soon turns sour across one fateful night.

"In movies that are set in a house out in the wilderness, usually the danger is trying to come in," says Abbott. "The fun twist of this is it's already in the house." And Whannell's scary, tragic and visually daring delights are lying in wait, ready to strike.

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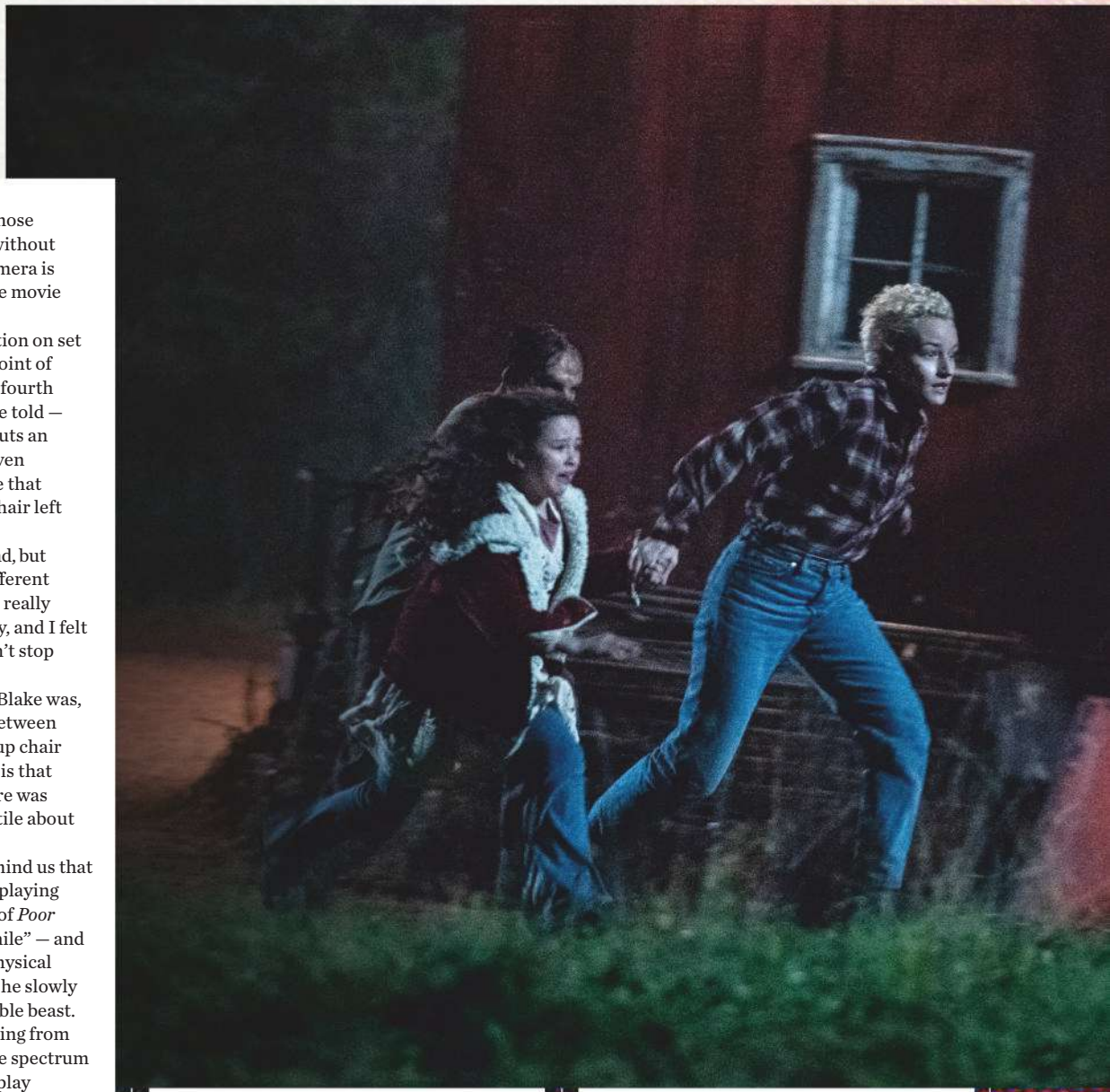
In a foggy soundstage in New Zealand, the Wolf Man slowly emerges from the darkness. As the camera swirls around 360 degrees, the lighting changes to reveal Garner's Charlotte and Firth's Ginger, before going dark again as we circle back to Abbott's monster, who's inching ever closer to his prey. It becomes clear that neither party can see the other, but they know they're not alone. With tension and terror rising, they're mere inches away from each other when the scene ends.

It's May 2024, and *Empire* has just gotten its first taste of 'wolf-vision', a new shooting style that Whannell devised for the movie. "This is gonna be like *The Silence Of The Lambs* when Jodie Foster is being stalked," he excitedly proclaims in-between takes. "By the time I'm finished with it, it'll be really scary."

Garner is more than game for the 'wolf-vision' experience. "That was one of the reasons why I wanted to do it," she tells us during a break from filming. "I've never read anything like that, and I've never seen anything like that on screen before."

The new technique represents yet another evolution of Whannell's visual style. In *Upgrade*, the camera moved in sync with its central character. In *The Invisible Man*, the camera moved away from its actors, as if it had a mind of its own.

"What I love playing with here is the difference between how Wolf Man sees the world and a human sees the world, ›



Clockwise from main: Charlotte (Julia Garner) and daughter Ginger (Matilda Firth) flee from changed dad Blake (Christopher Abbott); Ginger is in for a fright; Blake is not feeling himself; Director Leigh Whannell with Abbott and Garner on set.

and being able to drift between those two worlds and do it in camera, without cutting," he says. "It's as if the camera is this omnipresent character in the movie that's able to cross the border."

Empire's view from our position on set only gives us a side-on vantage point of Abbott's Wolf Man — here in the fourth stage of his transformation, we're told — as the sequence unfurls, but he cuts an impressively menacing figure. Even shrouded in darkness, we can see that there are only streaks of human hair left on his head.

"I saw some photos beforehand, but seeing it in real life is a totally different experience," says Garner. "It was really shocking and actually really scary, and I felt a little awkward because I couldn't stop studying his face."

Depending on how far gone Blake was, Abbott would spend anywhere between two to seven hours in the make-up chair getting wolfed up. "What I loved is that I thought it looked scary but there was also something very real and tactile about it," he says.

The actor is also quick to remind us that he has previous experience with playing animals on screen — "At the end of *Poor Things*, I was a goat for a little while" — and it's clear he was excited for the physical challenge of embodying Blake as he slowly deteriorates into an unrecognisable beast. "It's not just him immediately going from human to animal. There's a whole spectrum of it that's fun to play. You get to play with percentages. Is it 50/50, or is it closer to 80/20? It's such a unique thing to get to work on."

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Blake's decline adds layers of heart and tragedy to *Wolf Man*. Whannell has likened the transition to Alzheimer's, the infection slowly making the human body deteriorate until there's nothing left. He cites David Cronenberg's *The Fly* as a North Star when it comes to the appliance of practical effects.

"What *The Fly* did that a lot of other practical-effects-driven horror movies from that time did not do was bring the tragedy out of these practical effects," he says. "It wasn't a joke in *The Fly*. It was there to illustrate someone who was dying of an illness. I was like, 'I've got to do that.' It's not about being funny or icky or gory. This is about the tragedy of the human body falling apart."

And to give the film an added element of grounded realism, Whannell looked inward to his own painful personal experiences. "I had a close friend who was diagnosed with ALS and watching her and her husband go through this traumatic process was really wrenching," he says. "That emotional feeling was better research than any deep dive on the internet."

Abbott also has experience with a degenerative disease, and he too channelled it into his work. "When I was a kid, my grandmother had Alzheimer's and we lived in the same house at the time. It was scary to witness someone feel like they're slowly disappearing out of their own body and their own person."

In much the same way that encounters with illness in their personal lives affected him and his star, Whannell sought to make *Wolf Man* not just about Blake's journey, but about the impact it has on his loved ones. "I'm trying to capture the feeling of what it's like when someone you love is not there anymore, or the person they used to be is gone. And that's such a huge, difficult thing to deal with for a family, if you've known someone for many years."

At the movie's outset, Blake and his wife Charlotte are having marital problems. But Blake's transformation brings about a whole new set of issues to overcome, as Charlotte and Ginger quickly find themselves in mortal danger.

"In the beginning she's a caregiver," says Garner. "She's in denial that this is happening. She thinks he might get better. When you have a loss, there are seven stages of grief. And I told Leigh very early on that I wanted, and hopefully I will accomplish it, to go through the seven stages of grief in one day."

Whannell has nothing but admiration for Garner. "She's going to be the emotional compass of this film, and she's going to be what Shelley Duvall was in *The Shining*. You don't get scared in *The Shining* without Shelley Duvall. And so I was like, 'I've got to find someone who can drink up the audience's empathy.' And she did an incredible job."

Indeed, Whannell has a lot more on his mind than just scares. Freed from his creative paralysis, this is far more than just a simple reboot of a classic horror monster. This is a big, bold and personal swing. And he might not be done playing in Universal's monster sandbox yet.

PREDATOR: BADLANDS

THE TROPHY-HUNTING ALIEN GETS A MANDIBLE-DROPPING TWIST

OUT 07 NOV

WHEN DAN TRACHTENBERG was offered the chance to make another film set in the *Predator* universe — following his masterful 2022 prequel *Prey* — the obvious route didn't interest him. "I wasn't sure about just telling the next chapter in that story," the director says, of continuing *Prey*'s saga about 18th-century Comanche warrior Naru (Amber Midthunder) and her travails against a certain dreadlocked alien. Instead, he wanted to "find another essential piece of cinema that does what *Prey* did spiritually — pushing the franchise's boundaries, letting us root for a hero we rarely get to root for — but in a different way. And that transformed into this big idea of rooting for the Predator."

Yep, you read that right. This time, the extra-terrestrial trophy-hunter with a penchant for skinning its victims is... the *hero*. "The creature is front and centre, leading the charge," Trachtenberg grins. "He's still badass, but there's something there that touches you emotionally, too. Creating a character you connect with, but are also super-intimidated by, has been challenging. But exciting."

Appearing alongside this unlikely protagonist is Elle Fanning, about whose role the director is keeping shtum — except to say that it's actually *roles*, plural. "Elle plays more than one character," Trachtenberg confirms. "She faced intense challenges on this movie — dramatically, physically, logistically."

Shooting took place mostly in New Zealand, posing for an alien planet. "We had phenomenal locations," says the director. "*Prey* tapped into the adventure-movie spirit, but this goes further. There's more 'fun' and 'funny' in it, but it's way darker than *Prey*, too." And if Trachtenberg feels any pressure about following his critically lauded predecessor, he's not showing it: "That's one thing I'm *not* scared of, because I know audiences are driven by new experiences. And this [movie] is a brand-new experience."

Rooting for one of cinema's most iconic villains — it doesn't get much newer than that.

TOM ELLEN

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

•••••

It was only a few years ago that Universal's vaunted 'Dark Universe' crashed and burned after *The Mummy* flopped in 2017. But that loss has been Whannell's gain. 2020's *The Invisible Man* was a clever and suspenseful horror thriller update, and with *Wolf Man* — which he calls a "spiritual cousin to the *Invisible Man*, tonally" — he's giving another monster the same treatment. Might his next move be, well, more monstrous?

"My own weird filmmaker OCD is almost like, 'Well, I've made two. I have to do three.' It has to be three. But that's got more to do with my own neuroses than me actually wanting to do it. In my general life, I'm a pretty strange guy with my habits. I have to leave when it's an even number, like, 8:20, not 8:19, which is crazy. I'm probably revealing to you how crazy I am. So on that side of my brain, I gotta do a third one to complete the trilogy."

When *Empire* catches up with Whannell over Zoom in October, he's deep in post-production, and in high spirits. He's had no conversations with Jason Blum about what's next. But he'd be stoked to get the keys to the monster kingdom. "That's up to Universal. If they said, 'We want you to be the monster guy,' that would be flattering to me. Like, 'Wow, they're entrusting me with this thing that's so important to them.' But I'm not gunning for that role."

If he were to do another update on a Universal monster, though, he already has someone(s) in mind. "I do love Jekyll and Hyde. As a kid, the idea that they were both the same person was always super interesting to me."

But that isn't the only idea percolating in Whannell's brain. "I'm working on something. It's different to anything I've ever done before. It's more quirky and funny in tone. You never know where the thing is gonna come from. *Invisible Man* came about from a general meeting at Universal. It was not something I was angling to make. Like I said before, sometimes the film chooses you."

Whether he chooses the project or the project chooses him, one thing is for certain: Whannell is a long way away from assuming his final form.

TRON ARES

OUT 10 OCT

THIS AIN'T YOUR DADDY'S *TRON*. WELCOME TO A NEW DIGITAL FUTURE

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

TRON INVENTED THE FUTURE. THE 1982 film, written and directed by prodigious talent Steven Lisberger, was lightyears ahead of its time, as pioneering as cinema gets, influencing and inspiring in equal measure. Following computer programmer Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) as he found himself trapped inside software, fighting — and racing — for his life against programs, the film did well enough at the box office, but its legacy is infinite.

"Nobody had done what he did," says Joachim Rønning, the director who, over 40 years on, has picked up the mantle. "I mean, talk about *really* nobody understanding what you're doing," he says of what Lisberger started. "It wasn't even eligible for a [visual-effects] Oscar, because they felt it was cheating that he had used computers."

Rønning, then, is stepping into big shoes. Big, digital, neon shoes. *Tron: Ares* is, of course, the second sequel, following on from Joseph Kosinski's *Tron: Legacy* in 2010, in which Bridges' Flynn returned, living yogi-like in virtual-reality world The Grid. Rønning says we shouldn't quite consider *Ares* a sequel, though. Bridges is back again, but so is a whole new cast: Jared Leto, Jodie Turner-Smith, Greta Lee, Gillian Anderson, Evan Peters. "It's obviously the *Tron* universe, it's recognisable, but [it's] its own story."

Now, the boundaries between programs and humans are blurring. The focus here is on Leto's Ares, Master Control Program of the Dillinger grid — Dillinger hailing from *Tron*'s nefarious Ed Dillinger (played, in 1982, by David Warner), and his son Ed Dillinger Jr (Cillian Murphy, briefly, in *Tron: Legacy*). "Ares is not human, but goes on a journey and discovers what it means and what it takes to be human," says Rønning. With that comes a new twist, its software stylings — lightcycles and all — busting out into the real world. "That goes hand in hand with Ares' journey," continues Rønning. "And it's been an amazing journey for us too, working on the movie, to open up those kinds of possibilities — we wanted to mirror The Grid in the real world."

This boundary-blurring — aesthetically but also thematically — is why Rønning was hired for the job, he says, citing his previous film, the stirring *Young Woman And The Sea*, in which Daisy Ridley played Trudy Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. "What I always look for in any story is a strong emotional core," he explains. "This film will probably be more emotional than people are

Left: Computer program Ares (Jared Leto) is about to break into the real world.

expecting. It's about the cost of being human."

Leto himself has been a big driver of that too, says Rønning. A producer on the film, Leto has been attached for years, and is "basically a fanboy of the franchise. I think that's why he's never given up on it," he continues, referencing, perhaps, the production's different iterations and jagged evolution up to this point (for a few years, it was planned to be a direct sequel to *Tron: Legacy*, before the team eventually changed course like a sharply turning lightcycle; Rønning joined the film as it took shape in early 2023). "He's been instrumental in getting the movie to the big screen," says the director of Leto. "He's the keeper of the flame in many ways, and is extremely knowledgeable of this world. He submerged himself completely in the character. Even after the cameras stopped rolling, he was Ares. That's his method. I applaud any method, and in Jared's case, that means he only answers to the name of Ares for half a year. So be it. Whatever it takes."

Regardless of the film's new direction, there is strong connective fluid. There was *Tron* royalty on set, firstly in the form of Bridges, whose Flynn is back for more despite destroying himself for the greater good at the end of *Tron: Legacy*. "I think people are aware that in the *Tron* universe, when you're inside the server, you're not flesh and bone," laughs Rønning by way of *some* explanation. Secondly, though, there was Lisberger himself, who was, says Rønning, "involved all the way through. He's such an interesting human being, a very smart guy. He invented this. We wanted to pick his brain."

One of Lisberger's many bold choices was to hire Wendy Carlos to score 1982's synth-heavy *Tron*, and Kosinski scored a coup by deploying Daft Punk for *Tron: Legacy*. *Ares* follows suit, bagging the ever in-demand Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, but in the guise of their band Nine Inch Nails, suggesting not only that the film knows that following Daft Punk is no tall order, but that this score will have a harder edge. "With Nine Inch Nails making the music, this instalment will be a little grittier, a little bit more industrial," confirms Rønning. "It's been important for me to contrast The Grid and the real world. In that sense, Nine Inch Nails lends itself perfectly into this new *Tron* world that we are creating."

It feels like heritage underlies everything Rønning says about *Tron*. He knows what he's up against. Leaning into the old to, once again, create something new. "Fans of *Tron* are a different breed," he states. "It's a very passionate fanbase. You have this cloud of performance anxiety hanging over you, whipping you forward and creating that extra pressure. But that's a great challenge to have. I feel the pressure every day." Game on.

Hutch Mansell (Bob Odenkirk) squares up to a new enemy.

NOBODY 2

WHY WE'RE HYPED FOR THE RETURN OF BOB ODENKIRK'S ONE-MAN ARMY

OUT 15 AUG

ITS STAKES ARE HIGHER

In Ilya Naishuller's 2021 action drama *Nobody*, former government assassin Hutch (Bob Odenkirk) got *very* back in touch with his violent side. The sequel, for which Timo Tjahjanto takes the directing baton from Naishuller, has Hutch returning to duty full-time. But that may have a negative effect on his personal life. "This film is more about the juggle between being a family man [and] being tested on how much he is willing to push himself as a hitman," says Tjahjanto. This is compounded further by Hutch being a *sometimes* unintentional chaos merchant. "He's coming to terms [with the fact] that wherever he goes, trouble finds him. In a sense, he's still paying for his sins that he did in the first film. But that'll take us into a different territory later in the movie."

IT'S A MESSY FAMILY AFFAIR

When Hutch jumped back into the hitman game, it was a shock for his family, who had previously known him to be a mild-mannered suburban dad and husband. For the sequel, his wife (a returning Connie Nielsen) and kids aren't background players: they'll have full knowledge and lots of opinions on Hutch's vocation of choice. "Now that he's back at it in full throttle, how does his family react to this beast?" teases Tjahjanto. "You'll see a lot of the questions that fathers and husbands ask — 'How do they react to this other side of me who's constantly hustling and working for the family?' It's gonna be quite a journey."

IT STARS SHARON STONE AS A "BATSHIT" VILLAIN

Where Odenkirk's Hutch faced off against a vengeful Russian crime lord in the first film, the sequel will see him pitted against Sharon Stone's unpredictable villain. According to Tjahjanto, she's a force of nature. "Her performance reminds me a lot of Ben Kingsley in *Sexy Beast*," he says of that film's relentless, potty-mouthed psychopath Don Logan. "She is definitely an alpha female. She doesn't take shit from anybody. This is a villain that is unique, and she's making this character completely batshit crazy."

IT'S GOING TO UP THE ACTION ANTE

Nobody's brutal action sequences were memorably *John Wick*-esque, with Odenkirk doing the vast majority of his own stunts. Tjahjanto seeks to up the ante, and the humour: "It can be gritty, it can be visceral, but at the same time, it should have a warm beating heart to it. It should have this comedic element." Tjahjanto is especially excited for audiences to see his film's finale. "We do away with the whole drab, gloomy factory/warehouse feel of the first film," he says, "and make it much more summery and colourful."

IT BRINGS COMPLEX CHAOS

Tjahjanto's thrillers *The Night Comes For Us* and *The Shadow Strays* have established his penchant not only for chaotic action, but of unfortunate, unforeseen consequences for people who try and do the right thing. And now, he's brought that energy to *Nobody 2*. "I love the idea of a character trying to do some good, but it only brings us to even a bigger mess, a bigger chaos, a bigger bloodbath," he says. "And I think you're going to see that in this film, where Hutch is a man who says, 'I want to do good, I want to be this guy.' But whenever he tries to do the right thing, it just brings him [misery]. It's almost like a Tom And Jerry thing." Bring on the good deeds, and more to the point, the punishment. **AMON WARMANN**

GOLDEN

OUT TBC

MICHEL GONDRY TEAMING UP WITH PHARRELL WILLIAMS? TIME TO GET HAPPY. HERE, WILLIAMS TELLS US WHY...

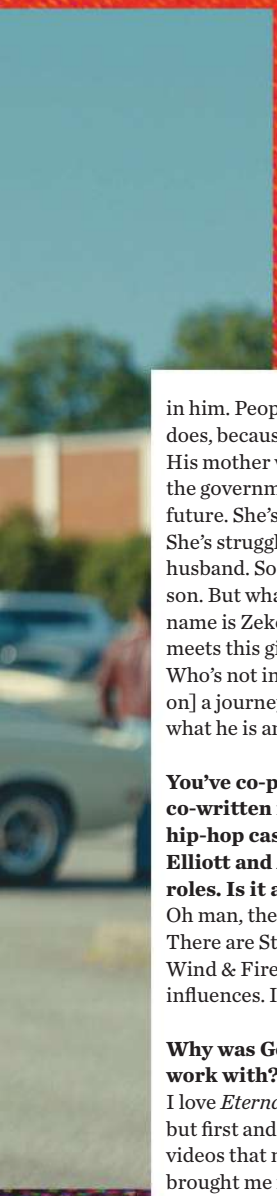
WORDS **AL HORNER**

***Golden* has been shrouded in secrecy. What can you tell us about it?**
Well, Michel Gondry and I set out to make this film about this neighbourhood with a lot of public housing. Usually, when you hear about public housing, at least in America, it's seen as the slums, and it's run-down and it's downtrodden. It's so heavy. You don't realise that that is an outside-in perspective, mostly. There are some sad stories to be told from the perspective of people coming from those places, but most of the time, the rest of the world and the rest of society looks down on those communities. So here is a film about hope and joy. We wanted to tell the other side of what it's like. Because for me, sure, there was crime in the neighbourhood — but there was also loads and loads of creativity. Inspiration was everywhere. It was in the air. It was in the air as thick as humidity.

The film was originally titled 'Atlantis'. Why the name change? What does this new title mean to you?
It just speaks to the narrative, the area, the energy and literally everything about [the film, which is] this analysis of what being "golden" is. Children and grown-ups with inner children within them can connect to it and realise that there's a golden aspect to them too, whether it's realised or latent.

You grew up in the neighbourhood the film depicts. How directly was the film inspired by your childhood — and how much overlap is there with your recent documentary, *Piece By Piece*, as a result?
Well, *Piece By Piece* is about my life, whereas *Golden* is about a neighbourhood that I grew up in. I happened to grow up in this neighbourhood, and the movie is about what that neighbourhood inspires. This is very different. It's a musical expedition, set in the summer of 1977 in Virginia Beach, Virginia, with the spirit of the music [of that time]. You know how in *Dirty Dancing* and *Grease*, the music was almost a character? That's what it's like in this film. It's a coming-of-age story about self-discovery and pursuing your dreams, but it's so much more magical than that. It's a celebration of Black life, Black culture, and most importantly, Black joy.

What does that translate to in terms of the film's story?
It's about this kid who has this latent talent



Golden times for Zeke Chiles (Kelvin Harrison Jr) and E.V. (Halle Bailey) at Virginia Beach.

in him. People around him see it before he does, because he's living his mother's dream. His mother wants him to go get a job within the government with assured income for the future. She's from a different generation. She's struggled. She recently lost her husband. So she wants a sure shot for her son. But what happens is this character — his name is Zeke Chiles [Kelvin Harrison Jr] — meets this girl who sees something in him. Who's not interested in him at first, but [goes on] a journey of trying to convince him of what he is and all the potential that's in him.

You've co-produced the film and co-written its songs. It's got a very hip-hop cast, with the likes of Missy Elliott and Anderson .Paak in supporting roles. Is it a rap musical?
Oh man, the music is actually really just 1977. There are Stevie Wonder influences. Earth, Wind & Fire influences. Steely Dan influences. I had a lot of fun with it.

Why was Gondry the right director to work with?
I love *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*, but first and foremost it was his early music videos that made me a fan of his work and brought me into his world. But I never got to make a music video with him! So now, here's this. (*Laughs*)

Your work in music and fashion frequently feels politically charged. *Golden* is a period piece — but is there something you think the movie says about the current time in America and the world?
The world is a beautiful place. The world is not lost. Man is lost. Man does things to the world. Man does things to himself. The dirt in Mexico knows exactly where it is. The dirt in Africa knows exactly where it is. The dirt in England knows where it is. It's man who sometimes loses his way. It's man who sometimes forces his presence, forces his ideas, and even worse, forces his hubris into situations and makes matters worse. It's man who is lost. My number one job is to have the viewer be liberated by what they're seeing. Because there's not many liberated people out there in the world, right? All you gotta do is look out there and see how many people are enmeshed in their phones. Film by film, song by song, garment by garment, shoe by shoe, this is what I'm here to do — to liberate or give the instructions how to.

Here: Cameron Diaz and Jamie Foxx taking that title very literally. **Below, left to right:** Glenn Close and Jamie Demetriou are also part of the starry cast; Relaxing on set.

BACK IN ACTION

CAMERON DIAZ RETURNS — AND SHE'S PULLING NO PUNCHES

OUT 17 JAN

BACK IN ACTION sees a certain A-lister, well, back in action. That would be Cameron Diaz, last seen on screen a decade ago, singing and dancing down a New York street at the end of 2014's *Annie*. And, as it happens, the star she's sharing top billing with is someone who was also dancing down that street, a few feet away from her: Jamie Foxx.

"Jamie's reps also rep Cameron," explains Seth Gordon, the director and co-writer of the Netflix action-comedy. "I had worked with Jamie on *Horrible Bosses* and we cast him in this first. Then his reps said, 'What about Cameron?'" I had thought she was totally retired, so I said, 'That would be amazing... but is that a thing?'"

It did, indeed, turn out to be a thing. And a most exciting thing for all fans of the star, who has spent the last ten years starting a family and launching a vegan-friendly organic wine ("Pour with confidence"). The film sees Diaz go Full Badass, playing a mom who is secretly a spy, as is her husband (Foxx), with both forced back to their old, bone-crunching ways by evil ne'er-do-wells. "We started [filming the action scenes] with a moment where Cameron and Jamie disarm a bunch of guards in order to get to their kids," remembers Gordon of Diaz's first day of tumult. "She was so prepped... she was essentially like an A+ student. It was like, 'Holy shit, we're not gonna need to cut to the stunt person.'"

Don't worry too much about that stunt person being left to twiddle their thumbs, though. "It's an action-comedy with a capital A for the action," says Gordon. "We got to play with the big toys." Previously, he has directed the likes of *Horrible Bosses* and *Identity Thief* — films which featured not a single plane fuselage tumbling down a mountain. *Back In Action*, on the other hand, very much has that ("Yeah, and I got to blame no-one, because I wrote it," laughs Gordon), plus a thundering set-piece at the Tate Modern and a chase down the Thames which incorporates boats and motorbikes.

But comedy has a capital C here too — not least in the dynamic between Diaz's Emily and Foxx's Matt, homebodies who leave bodies in their wake. "They've committed fully to the undercover life — the IKEA kitchen, the bedazzled Stanley Cup mug at the soccer practice," Gordon says. "We're taking these high-octane scenes and putting them in an unexpected setting. It's all the crisp action you would hope for, but driven by what I call her mama-bear energy. She really brought that intensity to it: hyper-adrenaline, the proverbial mom that can lift a car."

Cameron Diaz is back. Bad guys, start running now. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

THE ELECTR

OUT 14 MAR

THE RUSSO BROTHERS ARE BACK — AND THEY'RE BRINGING SOME ROBOTS WITH THEM

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

ROBOT UPRISINGS. THEY'RE TEN-A-penny on the big screen. Epic battles between a beleaguered mankind and armies of slick, sleek killing machines who absolutely will not stop until the humans are dead. If you've seen one, you've seen them all, right?

Perhaps not. It's unlikely you've seen any robot uprising like the one in *The Electric State*, the latest movie from Anthony and Joe Russo. Largely because, by the time the film, which is set in the 1990s, begins, the robots have already uprisen, and been promptly defeated by humanity and exiled. But also because the robots themselves are far from Terminator-like terrors. They're outlandish, cute critters who, in the alternate history of the 20th century presented by the movie, were initially designed and developed in the 1950s by Walt Disney himself. "These robots were developed as service bots for humanity," Anthony Russo tells *Empire*. "They have this appeal and openness and friendliness that make them non-threatening on the surface, but there could be something a lot more complex going on behind that."

To say the least. *The Electric State*, based on a 2018 graphic novel by Simon Stålenhag, focuses on Millie Bobby Brown's Michelle, an orphaned young woman who finds herself something of an outlier in a world where humanity is increasingly becoming addicted to new forms of technology, while robots have been banished into a giant part of the American Midwest called The Exclusion Zone.

Then, one night, a cute robot called Cosmo shows up at Michelle's foster home, and sets her off on a journey that will take her into that Exclusion Zone, with the help of a burned-out human soldier-turned-smuggler called Keats (Chris Pratt), and his robot buddy Herman (Anthony Mackie). It's a journey which might end up having a profound effect on the world itself. "She's Dorothy heading into Oz," says Joe Russo. "There's a lot of emotional weight in the film. It's a story about a girl who's lost her family."

The film's emotional complexity prompted the brothers, who've worked with Tom Holland, Chris Evans, Chadwick Boseman and Chris Hemsworth since initially leaving the Marvel Cinematic Universe, to flip their Rolodex once more to 'MCU'. "Mackie's got so many more moves than anyone has seen from him," says Anthony Russo of bringing the actor on

Left: Orphan Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown) goes on a quest to find her lost brother with grinning robot Cosmo and Keats (Chris Pratt). **Below:** Ethan Skate (Stanley Tucci).

THE ELECTRIC STATE

to voice Herman. "This was an effort on our part to tap into a new side of him." As for Pratt, who dons a shaggy hairdo and goatee to play Keats, "he can be at turns hilarious and empathetic and very emotional," says Joe Russo. "We work very well together in the experimental tone that is this film."

If you're Netflix, and have dropped a huge chunk of change on a movie from the directors of two of the four biggest movies of all time, featuring an all-star cast, the words "experimental tone" might well inspire the odd quiver of fear. But the chance to do something that feels new, unconventional and out-of-the-box is what attracted the Russos in the first place. "We love ambition," says Joe Russo. "We're in a fortunate place post those Marvel films where we can take some swings. This one's a big swing. It feels different. The essence of the fable is that the robots are more human than humans. Humans have succumbed to the ease of technology, which can lead to laziness and disassociation and shutting down from your fellow humans. That's a tough tone, that's a tough pill for people to swallow. And when you present really touchy subjects, it's best to put it in a fable."

The Electric State is the Russos' third film since *Avengers: Endgame*, but in many ways it's the most unashamedly Marvel-ish. Not only did their regular writing team of Christopher Markus (who first discovered the Stålenhag graphic novel and took it to the brothers) and Stephen McFeely write the script, it was edited by their key collaborator Jeff Ford and scored by Alan Silvestri. "There's a large-scale, Disney quality to the movie," says Joe Russo. "That's what attracted us to the book in the first place. The artwork is stunning, and the level of design and thought and complexity felt very fresh to us. There's an approachability, merged with a darkness and an edge. And we like complex tone."

Complex tone. Images of giant robots, having vandalised the Iwo Jima memorial, hurling an American flag at an attack helicopter. Oh, and the leader of the robots is fashioned after Mr. Peanut, the mascot of the US snack colossus, Planters. He's voiced by Woody Harrelson. Yep, it's safe to say that this is a journey into the unknown. "The movie is set in the '90s because that was the beginning of our digital lives," says Anthony Russo. "The movie is very much exploring that human experience. The hope is that we came up with these concepts that are corollaries to really profound and epic human experiences, in forms and shapes we haven't seen them done in yet." Plug in.

Top: Dr Amherst (Ke Huy Quan) takes aim. **Bottom:** Colonel Bradbury (Giancarlo Esposito) thinks inside the box.

Snipers Drasa (Anya Taylor-Joy) and Levi (Miles Teller) join forces against a mysterious foe.

OUT TBC

THE GORGE

MILES TELLER AND ANYA TAYLOR-JOY LOOK INTO THE ABYSS

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

SCOTT DERRICKSON DOESN'T make cosy films. For his entire career so far as a director, everything he's done deals in murky, malevolent material, and does what it says on the tin. *Hellraiser: Inferno*. *The Exorcism Of Emily Rose*. *Sinister*. Even *The Black Phone* had a spooky, erm, ring to it. So what the hell to make of *The Gorge*?

What indeed. Having been sent the screenplay, written by Zach Dean (who worked on *The Tomorrow War* and *Fast X*), Derrickson had no idea what to expect — and that continued to be the case as he read the whole thing. "It mixes so many genres — I had never read anything quite like it. I couldn't compare it to anything else." He immediately started thinking visually. "When I got to the end of the first act, I was very engaged, but I knew that whatever ended up actually being inside the gorge was going to have to be great."

Guarding that gorge are two snipers, Levi and Drasa, played in the film by Miles Teller and Anya Taylor-Joy — each are separately recruited to live for a while on either side of the foreboding, seemingly bottomless ravine. There will be romance. There will be action. There will be horror. Most significantly, there will be surprises, on just about every level. "It is not structured like — and does not function like — any other film," Derrickson promises. "It pivots story and blends genres. It's very rare that you get an opportunity to do something that experimental and unique at this budget, and the tonal shifts were part of the fun, to be whipsawed as one would be as a career soldier of the highest order, which both of them are. I'm sure that the experience of real soldiers thrown into real situations is a whipsaw constantly. And in this case, when you're also including the fantastical, all the more so."

Ah yes. The fantastical. What, exactly, lies beneath? As a scaly, clawed hand on the poster hints, something, well, non-human.

And Derrickson teases a nightmare. "By the end of the first act, we've promised the audience that what's down there is really scary, mysterious, unpredictable. In order for the movie to work, when you go down there it needs to be all of those things." And he wanted those things to be *new*. "I tried to make it exhilarating, scary, fun, fascinating, engaging — and not typical. Not filled with set-pieces we've seen before, not filled with visuals we've seen before. I wanted to just really go for it."

Derrickson has previous here; as he reminds us, his one-time dalliance with the MCU flipped the franchise on its head. "I made a very visually ambitious Marvel movie. *Doctor Strange* could have failed in so many ways. But the thrill of making that was, 'How can I make a psychedelic movie about magic and sorcerers? One that is fun to watch, but also has a tactile realness to how it looks and feels.'"

And with *The Gorge*, he wanted to do that again; to go for broke. "That's the challenge to me about making a big-budget, heavy visual-effects movie: to push the envelope further and give audiences experiences they haven't had before, but to also keep it feeling physically real, and to use the tools of big sets to provide an experience that's different and unpredictable. I'm very proud of the fact that *The Gorge* does that."

Be on your guard.

Unassuming CIA keyboard jockey Charlie Heller (Rami Malek) is seeking revenge.

THE AMATEUR

RAMI MALEK ON HIS ESPIONAGE THRILLER... AND A NEW BREED OF HERO

OUT 11 APR

THE 'TACHE WAS gone. It was 2018 when *Bohemian Rhapsody* stormed the box office and won Rami Malek an Oscar, and with the prosthetic teeth on the shelf for good, the studio asked him what he wanted to do next. "I said, 'Believe it or not, I want to do an action film, but I want it to be sophisticated and elegant, and have something that reminds me of *The Fugitive*, *The Bourne Identity*," recalls the actor. "'But with a real everyman.'"

The Amateur is adapted from Robert Littell's 1981 espionage novel about Charlie Heller, an unassuming CIA cryptographer who embarks on an uncompromising revenge mission after his wife is murdered. Malek became an exec producer, working to develop the screenplay and hiring *Slow Horses*' James Hawes to direct. "I wanted to do an action thriller about someone who is perhaps not as capable as a Bond or Ethan Hunt, but someone we can relate to, someone who speaks truth to power," says Malek. "He's enduring a substantial amount of grief. But at the same time, he's acknowledging his power and allowing that pain to turn itself into even more of a certain type of power, perhaps violence, and a steeliness that allows him to go beyond himself."

Charlie Heller isn't, then, about mere fisticuffs. Although *The Amateur* has its fair share of "explosive action", what sets it apart, says Malek, is Heller's "resourcefulness, his ingenuity and brilliance". He references a line in the film in which someone says Heller is "just a nerdy fella". Not quite. "He's a cog in the wheel, but he knows perhaps 90 per cent of what the CIA knows, and is capable of using that against them." While making it, he continues, the linchpins were, as well as the aforementioned thrillers, the likes of *Speed* and *Die Hard*. "I don't want to sound too idealistic," he explains, "but I think heroism is more common in all of us than we acknowledge." Revenge of the nerds? Let's go. **ALEX GODFREY**

Reunited buds Karen Page (Deborah Ann Woll), Daredevil/Matt Murdock (Charlie Cox) and Foggy Nelson (Elden Henson) head out.

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

WHEN IS A REBOOT NOT A REBOOT? WHEN IT'S A REBIRTH...

OUT 05 MAR

READY TO RETURN to Hell's Kitchen? Charlie Cox's Matt Murdock first appeared in Netflix's *Daredevil* — three bloody, brutal seasons that made the hyper-eared character a fan favourite. After its cancellation, Marvel reclaimed the rights to their horniest hero and Cox was — to our delight — brought back for cameos in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *She-Hulk* and *Echo*.

Now he's reprising his role in *Daredevil: Born Again*, as are Deborah Ann Woll and Elden Henson (as Matt's friends Karen and Foggy), and Vincent D'Onofrio (as nemesis Wilson Fisk, aka Kingpin). Reassuringly, *Born Again*'s Matt is the same iteration we've seen before. "There was talk early on about reinventing the whole thing, to see if Matt was a slightly different person," Cox tells *Empire*. "But it ended up more of a continuation. A lot of the history follows on. The relationships and dynamics set up in the previous seasons still exist."

The new show begins after a time jump from *Daredevil* Season 3, which saw Kingpin's corruption exposed and him back behind bars. "A few years have passed," Cox explains. "In that time, Matt, Foggy, and Karen have found a pretty good rhythm. Matt's made peace with his role both as a lawyer and a vigilante. Then, of course, shit hits the fan."

As for the hulking, ruthless crime lord Kingpin? His next move is entering the New York mayoral race. "[Matt's] convinced there's more to it than meets the eye," Cox says. "He struggles knowing how much he should involve himself." Despite that, the pair declare something of a truce. "There's a sense their obsession with stopping each other had a detrimental effect on society. There's an attempt to stay out of each other's lane, as long as lines aren't crossed." But, Cox teases, "I'm not sure that's adhered to for long." Time to let that devil back out. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh), John Walker (Wyatt Russell), Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen) and Red Guardian (David Harbour) take a road trip. **Below:** Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan) waits in the wings.

THUNDER

OUT 02 MAY

PREPARE TO HIT THE ROAD WITH THE MCU'S MOTLIEST CREW YET

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

WHEN KEVIN FEIGE first announced *Thunderbolts** (the asterisk, which is officially part of the title, and about which nobody involved is saying a damn thing, was added later) at the San Diego Comic-Con in July 2022, it felt somewhat paradoxical. In that nobody quite knew what to expect from the movie, which throws together a ragtag bunch of some of the MCU's most intriguing supporting characters... but yet, everyone seemed to instantly understand what it might be: Marvel's answer to *The Suicide Squad*.

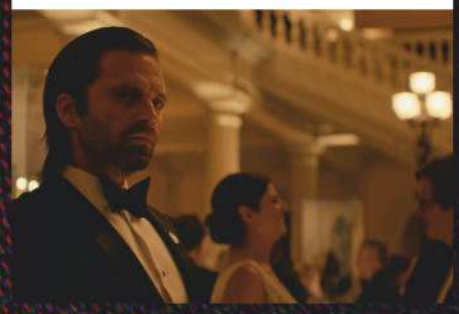
Take that line-up, for example. There's Yelena Belova, Florence Pugh's deadly Russian assassin and kid sister of Scarlett Johansson's late, lamented Natasha Romanoff; Sebastian Stan's Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier himself; David Harbour's Red Guardian, former Russian super-soldier and Yelena's deadbeat surrogate dad; Wyatt Russell's disgraced former Captain America, John Walker; Olga Kurylenko's Russian killing machine Taskmaster (alas, Little Alex Horne is nowhere to be seen); and Hannah John-Kamen's Ghost, first and last seen in *Ant-Man And The Wasp*. That's a suicide squad, if ever there was one. The MCU's motliest crew. A positively dirty half-dozen.

"It's a story about people who have been neglected, or left behind, or haven't become exactly what they thought they would become," teases director Jake Schreier, making his Marvel debut after working on 2015 romcom *Paper Towns* and TV comedy-drama *Beef*.

In fact, it was Schreier's time on *Beef* that allowed him to beef up *Thunderbolts**, and twist its tone in his preferred direction. "We were lucky to have my friend Sunny [Lee Sung Jin], who created *Beef*, come on to a draft, and my friend Joanna Calo, who works on *The Bear*, after him," he says. "And if you think about those two shows, they're defined in the comedy category, but they're very dramatic pieces of work that are touching and emotional in a lot of ways. I think that our film aims to strike a very similar balance. Ideally, the humour comes from character."

Take, for example, a gag from the film's teaser, in which Bucky retrieves his mechanical arm from a dishwasher. The trailer is further filled with chuckles as Marvel's most unwanted get in each other's faces and on each other's nerves. "Come for the dishwasher jokes, stay for the deep emotional journey," says Schreier.

How the Thunderbolts wind up as the Thunderbolts, and indeed get their asterisk, remains to be seen. "I've seen a lot of synopses out there that just say, as though it's a fact, that it's a team assembled by Valentina to go do bad things," says Schreier, referring to Julia-Louis



THUNDERBOLTS*

Dreyfus' sinister string-puller, Val, a character who has had earlier dodgy dealings with Yelena and Walker. "I understand why that would be the assumption, but that is not the story."

Instead, it seems the Thunderbolts aren't so much assembled as hurled into a cement mixer and given a thorough spinning. "It's exciting to think of movies like *Ronin* or *Reservoir Dogs*, where you have a group of people that has no reason to trust each other," says Schreier. "Could they even learn to work together? What sort of conflicts would arise?"

At various points in the MCU already, many of these characters have been in conflict. And in the above image from the film, Yelena, Walker, Red Guardian (aka Alexei) and Ghost (or Ava Starr) find themselves in a car, bickering. "The fun of the movie is having it be about bad people who had done bad things," says Schreier. "Sometimes that takes the form of your embarrassing dad coming to pick you up. That's just as embarrassing when you're an adult as it is when you're a kid."

It seems that *Thunderbolts** is a true ensemble piece (there's also Lewis Pullman as Bob, a character who will likely turn out to be ludicrously over-powered entity The Sentry, who may end up as the team's greatest asset or biggest headache), but every team has a captain. Here, that seems to be Pugh's Belova, who made a huge impact in *Black Widow*, and reinforced that with a captivating cameo in *Hawkeye*. "She's front and centre," confirms Schreier. "Yelena is in a certain place at the beginning of the film, and how she finds her way out of that place, and who she finds herself out of that place with, is at the heart of the story."

One sequence, hinted at in the trailer, sees Yelena facing off against Walker and Ghost and Taskmaster, who can replicate any fighting move instantly, and it seems to set the tone for the movie's action sequences. "Each of them has a different target," says Schreier. "It's this never-ending circle of action, trying to defend yourself against one and pursue another. It's fun. But it's never just doing something because it's cool. We hope that it is cool, but it's also grounded in the character architecture."

Action. Attitude. Assassins aplenty. Marvel's newest supergroup might be about to break all kinds of rules, and bones. "I think we'll have something new for people, that feels pretty different," says Schreier. We just need to figure out what that damn asterisk stands for.

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

THE MONKEY

HOT ON THE HEELS OF THE TERRIFYING *LONGLEGS*, OSGOOD PERKINS GOES BANANAS

OUT 21 FEB

STEPHEN KING'S *THE MONKEY* IS A SHORT story that forms part of his 1985 collection, *Skeleton Crew*. It tells the tale of a man who becomes convinced that a sinister childhood toy — a wind-up, cymbal-smashing monkey — is an unstoppable harbinger of death. It is dark, filled with foreboding and bleak as hell.

Osgood Perkins' adaptation might be dark — following *Longlegs*, that's a fairly safe assumption — but according to the director himself, bleak as hell is not on the dance card. "It's a redemptive, soulful comedy about the fact that everybody dies in the world," he tells *Empire*. "If John Landis and Chuck Jones had a baby, you'd have this. It's really sweet, sad, funny, shocking, gory, violent, ridiculous, cartoonish, poignant. I love it."

Perkins admits that he has basically overhauled it ("Lucky for me, The King has to approve, and lucky for me, The King enthusiastically approves"), turning it into a story of estranged twin brothers (played in adulthood by Theo James) who must reconnect when the monkey toy — which in the film bashes a deadly drum — comes back into their lives. "And when it's there, crazy deaths happen," says the director. "Really unfortunate things happen to people, out of nowhere." The trailer suggests some of those deaths involve swimming pools and electricity, prams on fire and exceptionally sharp blades. And blood. Lots of blood. "I felt like there should be a Looney Tunes, *Itchy & Scratchy*, 'Is there really that much blood in a human being?' level," states Perkins.

Longlegs was his macabre (and darkly hilarious) breakthrough. He's comfortable with raised expectations. "I'm doing a bit of a trust-fall into the audience's arms," he says. "I'm trusting that an audience wants to see a filmmaker that they like, doing what they want to do, as long as you're doing it well." Start the drum-roll now…

CHRIS HEWITT

Top to bottom: Mark Scout (Adam Scott) with one hell of a stress ball; Irving Bailiff (John Turturro) makes a call; The inscrutable Harmony Cobel (Patricia Arquette); Director Ben Stiller on set.

SEVERANCE SEASON 2

OUT 17 JAN

AS HIS MYSTERIOUS DRAMA ABOUT WORK/LIFE BALANCE RETURNS, BEN STILLER TELLS US THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET EVEN STRANGER

WORDS **AMELIA TAIT**

Most of the actors in *Severance* play two parts — an 'innie' trapped at work and an 'outie' in the real world. But by the end of Season 1, we've seen some of the barriers between them break down...
The idea that was set up at the end of the first season was that Mark [Adam Scott] finds out his wife's alive, and that is a main drive of the second season — he's trying to find his wife. To me what's interesting about the show is an innie and an outie having to deal with each other and having to reconcile different objectives. Any time there's a situation that is like, "Oh, this couldn't happen in any other show," that's what we're going to go for.

Is it difficult to direct when each actor is playing two roles?
That's been a challenge for us on the second season — figuring out, "How do we interweave these stories?" But literally it's almost five years we've been working on this show — for two measly seasons! — so all these actors now really understand their characters in a very deep way. So I kind of rely on them when we're working to really have the sense of what they feel instinctually is right or wrong, too.

The first season veered from being grounded to more heightened and stylised. Does Season 2 play with tone in the same way?
I thought about that a lot. I was excited to do something that we hadn't done before. Honestly, the whole season, we tried to not repeat ourselves too much. We wanted to keep the core vibe and feeling of the show, but try to go to some new places. We try not to be too strict in terms of what we can or can't do. Sometimes it feels a little bit like, "Okay, I hope people want to go there with it," but it's also fun to see where you can go.

Season 1 had some killer cliffhangers. Can we expect more?
I learned on the first thing I directed for television as a series, *Escape At Dannemora*, that the goal is just, you want people to want to watch the next episode. It's a very simple thing. It doesn't have to be a cliffhanger, but you just want to end with, "Okay, I want to see what's going to happen next." That's what we have tried to do, but within that also not frustrate people too much by not answering questions or being really oblique. And we try to mix it up and have fun, have some humour. The first season we realised you can have humour, you can have violence, you can have some creepiness...

Was it hard to maintain that humour as you take viewers deeper into this dark world?
There is darker stuff going on, but I hope that we still have humour within it. We dig into the relationships too, which I think people get invested in. The world has expanded and I think the stakes have to get higher as it goes along, too.

In the three years since *Severance* debuted, fans have been continuously dissecting Season 1. How much do you pay attention to online chatter and Reddit theories?
If I actually knew how to get on Reddit, I might actually read it! I'm so old, I can't... That works in my favour. I have been directed towards it but I don't delve too deeply into that stuff. When the show first came out, it was interesting to look at that because it was so surprising to us that people cared that much. It was really wonderful. But then after a while, you have to put that stuff away and really just think about what you want the show to be. Part of putting the second season together was trying to balance which of the mysteries we wanted to answer and maybe even give some closure on, and which mysteries we wanted to keep.

One YouTube video claims to have found 81 hidden details in the show. Do people ever 'spot' things that don't actually have a secret meaning?
Well, it's interesting, because the first season we made completely in a bubble, really — it was during Covid, and we had no feedback from anybody. We were just building a world and trying to be detail-oriented. Sometimes something is intentional and sometimes something is just there because we think it looks interesting or cool! Definitely people read stuff in [to it] that isn't intentional or sometimes has a different intention. But that's also been fun in the second season, because I saw how much people cared, and it really informed us as we were trying to build out that world.

Alamy

25 MORE FOR '25

THE BEST OF THE REST...

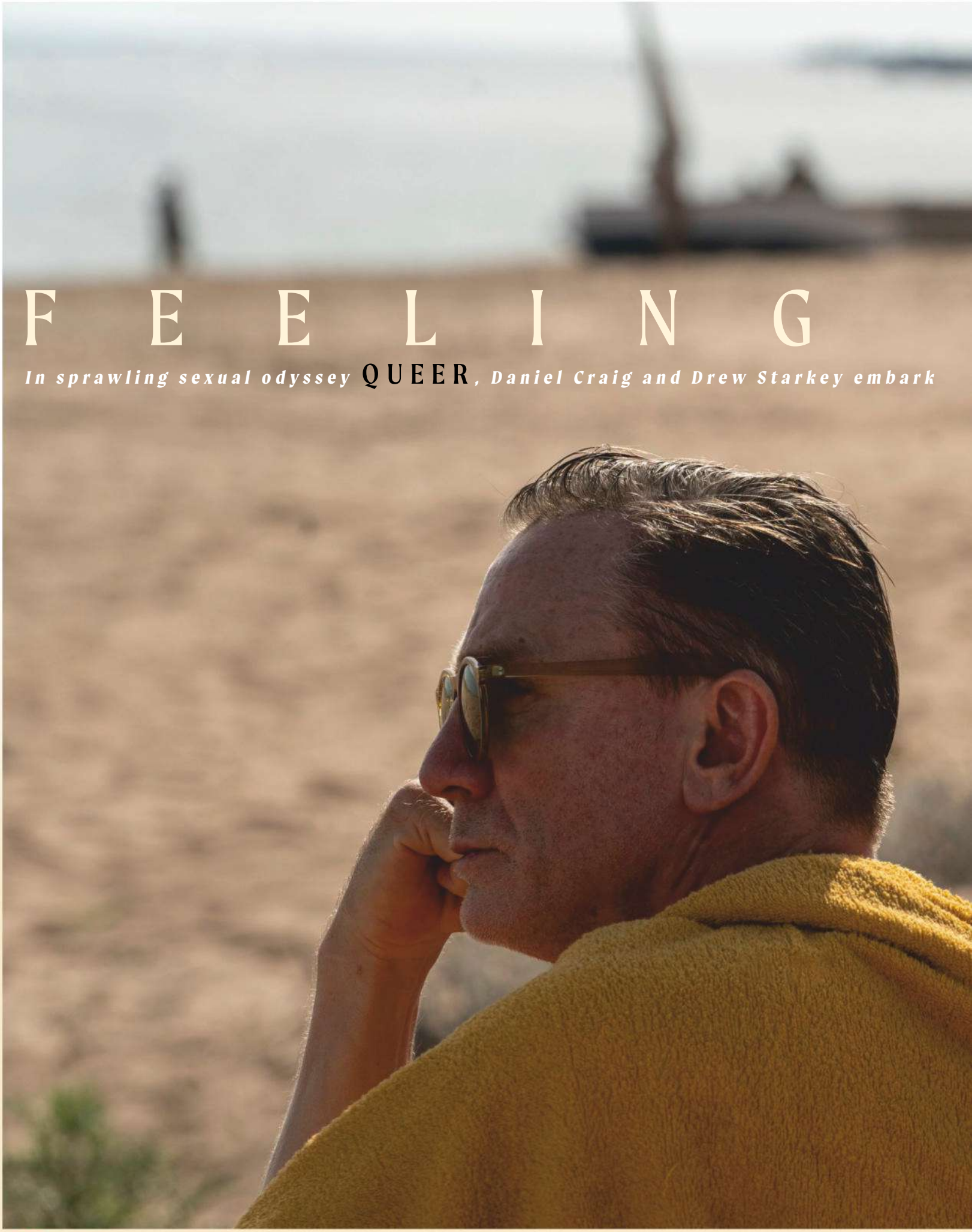
Director Brady Corbet barges into the new year with heavyweight awards-contender **THE BRUTALIST** **(24 JAN)**... Robert Pattinson stars alongside himself in Bong Joon Ho's sci-fi comedy-thriller **MICKEY 17** **(31 JAN)**... As does Michael B. Jordan in Ryan Coogler's horror **SINNERS** **(7 MAR)**... **MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE** is back for an *eighth* bout of insane daredevilling **(21 MAY)**... Remember Danny Boyle's sprinting dead? Twenty-three years later, we have **28 YEARS LATER** **(20 JUN)**... *Wakanda Forever's* tech-genius Riri Williams gets her own show with **IRONHEART** **(25 JUN)**... Brad Pitt goes to the races in Joseph Kosinski's **F1** **(27 JUN)**... The natty killer robot is back in **M3GAN 2.0** **(27 JUN)**... David Corenswet slips into the spandex for James Gunn's **SUPERMAN** **(11 JUL)**... The MCU gets galactic — or at least Galactus — in **THE FANTASTIC FOUR: FIRST STEPS** **(25 JUL)**... PTA directs Leonardo DiCaprio in a drama that might be called 'The Battle Of Baktan Cross', but for now shall be known as **UNTITLED PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON FILM** **(8 AUG)**... Jordan Peele produces **HIM**, a horror, natch, directed by Justin Tipping and starring Marlon Wayans **(19 SEP)**... Maggie Gyllenhaal's Frankenstein film **THE BRIDE!** has an exclamation mark, presumably for good reason **(26 SEP)**... Yorgos Lanthimos is back for more mischief with **BUGONIA** — it's his first sci-fi, so the mind boggles **(7 NOV)**... James Cameron will once again look to trouble the all-time top-ten box-office with **AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH** **(19 DEC)**... It's the final time to go Upside Down for the climactic season of **STRANGER THINGS** **(TBC)**... Chloé Zhao gets Shakespearean with **HAMNET** — Paul Mescal stars as Bill **(TBC)**...

Top to bottom: Ryan Coogler's *Sinners*; Jessie Buckley in *The Bride!*; Dominique Thorne in *Ironheart*; David Corenswet and canine pal Krypto in James Gunn's *Superman*.

Can you smell what the Rock is cooking? Yes, it's MMA/wrestling drama **THE SMASHING MACHINE**, which has Dwayne Johnson starring for Benny Safdie **(TBC)**... while Benny's brother, Josh, brings us **MARTY SUPREME**, a biopic about table-tennis supremo Marty Reisman starring Timothée Chalamet **(TBC)**... It's alive! Guillermo del Toro finally unleashes **FRANKENSTEIN** **(TBC)**... In **ALIEN: EARTH**, Noah Hawley brings Ridley Scott's beasts to television **(TBC)**... Benoit Blanc gets his figurative knives out for a third time in **WAKE UP DEAD MAN** **(TBC)**... Julia Ducournau follows up 2021's tremendous *Titane* with **ALPHA** **(TBC)**... Michaela Coel and Anne Hathaway get together for David Lowery's music melodrama **MOTHER MARY** **(TBC)**... And let's sign off with the second season of **THE LAST OF US** — set to be a glorious downer **(TBC)**. It's gonna be quite a year.

FEELING

In sprawling sexual odyssey **QUEER**, *Daniel Craig and Drew Starkey embark*



THE HEAT

on an intensely passionate relationship in 1950s Mexico City. And for director Luca Guadagnino, everything's been leading to this

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

Somewhere in Luca Guadagnino's mother's house, in Sicily, there's a box containing a very important script.

The script probably isn't very good — Guadagnino wrote it when he was about 22, possessed of more enthusiasm than skill — but he'll never allow it to be thrown away. It represents his first steps with a story that has fascinated him for over 30 years and which, though he didn't know it at the time, would shape much of his career.

The script is an adaptation of William S. Burroughs' *Queer*, which Guadagnino had read around five years before his first attempt to translate it, when he was 17. Written in the 1950s, but not published until the relatively enlightened 1985, *Queer* is a loose, broadly autobiographical story about William Lee — essentially an avatar for Burroughs — a middle-aged, drug-addicted expat living in Mexico City, who develops a fixation on a young, beautiful man named Eugene Allerton. Socially gregarious as he is, Lee has no idea how to simply tell Allerton he likes him. He drives himself close to madness trying to deduce whether his feelings are reciprocated.

Guadagnino knew none of that when browsing the shelves of his favourite little bookstore — he loved it because they'd say nothing as he spent hours reading without making a single purchase — and his gaze stopped at the title, in Italian *Diverso*. "Different". That called out to him, but what was inside shaped his life.

"I knew where my desires lay, but what was probably unformed was how to express my desires," says Guadagnino, who is gay, and at 17 felt *molto diverso*. "In a way, Lee in the novel is kind of childish in his incapability to express his desire. Probably unconsciously, it must have been feeling very close to home for me, this sense of incapacity... How do I reach out to the person that I want?"

From *Melissa P.* to *Call Me By Your Name* to *Bones And All*, many of Guadagnino's films started as books. "I have had a few epiphanies in my life with novels that I've read, and they stay with me to the degree that I want to make a movie out of them," he says. "I immediately thought that I wanted to [make a movie of] this."

He already considered himself a filmmaker — he got his first Super 8 camera at seven and graduated to the technological whizzery of a camcorder at 14 — and thought of *Queer* often, until eventually preparing to give the world his vision. "When I was 22, I was quite a megalomaniac," he laughs. "In my mind, I thought, 'I'm going to do it now. I'm going to find the money to do it and I'm going to create it all in [legendary Italian film studio] Cinecittà.'"

Guadagnino would make his dream project, and he *would* create it all in Cinecittà. But he would have to wait another 30 years.

Clockwise from far left: Eugene Allerton (Drew Starkey) gets to know William Lee (Daniel Craig); A quiet drink; Joe Guidry (Jason Schwartzman) with some engrossing literature; Lee is comforted by Allerton; Director Luca Guadagnino on set with Craig.

IT'S QUITE HARD TO IMAGINE Guadagnino as an unconfident youth. Sitting with him in a suite in London's Claridge's hotel, he could barely seem more content with himself. Tall and rangy, Guadagnino drapes himself over a not-big-enough sofa, expressive limbs shooting out beyond its boundaries as he talks, in quick, ever-so-slightly-broken English. He seems extremely comfortable in his own views, intelligence and abilities. But there's a reason many of his films explore complicated romance, in which often at least one person is struggling to tell another how they feel. "I am a very confident person," says Guadagnino, "but if there's a place where I'm not confident, it's that. I'm awkward in that."

His films aren't *all* about all-consuming attraction — you'll struggle to find much romantic yearning in *Suspiria* — but, especially in the last ten years, it's been a recurring theme. *Call Me By Your Name* had a young man experiencing his first passionate affair with someone who couldn't be wholly his; his TV series *We Are Who We Are* followed two teens working out who they are and what/who they want; *Challengers* has everyone desperate to bang everyone else. And it's not just the recent ones. His breakthrough movie, 2009's *I Am Love*, is about a woman edging towards blowing up her family for an affair. Reading *Queer* was the beginning of all that. Guadagnino isn't entirely sure if it was the book that set his mind in this direction or whether he loved the book because it articulated something he was already feeling.

"Did I have it in me and the book unearthed it, or was I influenced by the book?" he wonders. "I don't know, but certainly there's an influence I can track [through my work]. A tension of longing. A tension of misunderstanding between the lovers. A tension of the unknown, of desire. All of these things that I feel are part of what I've done so far are very present in the book."

The reason he spent so many years exploring themes that are present in *Queer*, but not actually making *Queer*, is simple: someone else always had the rights. He kept checking on their availability every so often, and it was only a few years ago, while working on *Challengers*, that the rights became available. He almost immediately asked *Challengers*' writer Justin Kuritzkes, who he describes as "a brother", to adapt the book.

It was a tough ask. Not only is *Queer* light on plot — its interest is almost completely in what is unsaid — but it's a story without an ending. Burroughs never finished the book. "How do we complete the book without sounding arrogant toward the modesty of Burroughs?" says Guadagnino. "He didn't want to complete it! And there are reasons he didn't want to. His longings for his own Allerton were so brutal and so burning that he didn't want it to have an end."

Guadagnino and Kuritzkes devised an ending that follows the threads Burroughs left, providing a resolution of sorts, but not a neat tying up. Had the director been able to make the film when he was younger, he suspects it would have been the worse for it. He's now around the age of Lee in the book, more able to see what life looks like from his vantage point. "I'm happy, because it needed more maturity for me to be able to do what I needed to do."

Fittingly, for a book about constantly reaching for something just beyond your grasp, Guadagnino's whole journey with *Queer* has been about patience and persistence. He found the perfect man to play Lee about two decades ago. But again, was oblivious to it until much later.

ONE PLEASANT SUMMER EVENING, IN, Guadagnino thinks, 2004, a well-known Italian actor was hosting a party in her Rome apartment. Some of the great and good of Italian cinema, plus a few golden sprinkles of Hollywood, were enjoying the company of equally glamorous people. Moving uncomfortably among them was Luca Guadagnino. He didn't feel quite right here. He had a few films to his name at that point, mostly shorts, but was a few years shy of making *I Am Love*. He felt like an intruder.

"I never really belonged to the world of Italian cinema," says Guadagnino. "Every community has their own mores, their own ›

behaviours, and I never really found myself at ease there." Though by nobody's definition a wallflower, he felt out of place in this crowd. Then he spotted someone — like him, unknowingly on the cusp of breakthrough — and crossed the room to introduce himself.

"The only person I was interested in was Daniel Craig," says Guadagnino. "I loved him so much — *Love Is The Devil*. *The Mother*. *Enduring Love*." Neither man knew Craig was but a year from being cast as James Bond and would soon become one of the most famous people on the planet. "We only exchanged a few words," says Guadagnino, "I was just starting my career, but I was meeting someone with a sort of legend to me, and he was so kind. I really felt there was some connection that someday we were going to explore."

Craig's memory of the meeting has a Guadagnino-esque romance. It was one of the last times in his life when he could move around relatively unnoticed. "I spent two or three glorious days in Rome with some lovely people," Craig says, over Zoom. "We got invited to this party in a little apartment that looked over the Colosseum. It was one of those amazing moments. And there Luca was. We talked about working together, as you do."

It was really just one of those things you say. Craig remembers he was aware of Guadagnino, but can't say if he'd actually seen any of his films. They had no real contact again until Craig was given the script for *Queer*. Guadagnino thought he'd be perfect for Lee, because he wanted someone "iconic", but didn't think Craig would be interested, because he'd just finished playing one of the great icons of cinema. "He's not iconic because he played an iconic role," says Guadagnino. "Many actors who play iconic roles, they die beyond the boundaries of that character. Very few are iconic by themselves. Daniel is." Guadagnino's agent, Bryan Lourd, said Craig would love it and they should send it to him. He was right.

Post-Bond after 2021's *No Time To Die*, Craig was in an interesting position. He had a level of fame that meant he could continue making blockbusters for as long as he wanted, but enough money that he didn't have to. He wasn't in a hurry to work again. *Queer* is only the second movie he's made since ending his time as 007 — the other is *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* — and that was fine with him. "I want to be at home," he says. "I've got a family and I want to try to be in their lives as much as possible. I don't want to be going away all the time. I've done that. I did maybe 15 years of Bond. That took me away a great deal. As glorious and magical as that was, it puts a strain on your family life."

He was also trying to get himself back in the headspace he had when Guadagnino first became a fan, where he'd just fly on instinct, without a thought for what might be commercial or how people might view him. He wanted to stop overthinking. "Very early on, when I started doing Bond, I made the mistake of trying to counter Bond [in other projects], to try and do things that felt like something else," he says. "You're on a hiding to nothing. You can't be reactive. It just doesn't work." Now in his fifties, he only wants to work when he feels he can't say no. "Here's the third act of my life," he says. "I want to pick and choose the right things to do."

He was ready to say yes before even reading the script, because he was so keen to work with Guadagnino. He was barely familiar with Burroughs, except for once reading *Junkie*, but was taken with all the roiling emotion of *Queer*. "It's a love story," he says. "It's about lust and desire, all of these carnal

Clockwise from far left: Lee and Allerton feel the pull of attraction; Alone time; Tom Weston (Ariel Schulman) and John Dumé (Drew Droege) elegantly hit the bar; Lee and Allerton with Doctor Cotter (Lesley Manville); An intense conversation for Cotter and Allerton.

emotions, that are universal to everyone. I thought, 'I could make something of this.'"

CRAIG SO EMBODIES THE simultaneously desperately extrovert and romantically anxious Lee that it's widely predicted the performance could bring his first Oscar nomination. And he's not the only one getting attention. Playing Eugene Allerton, the inscrutable object of Lee's obsession, is Drew Starkey, an actor who seems poised for fame in the way Craig was 20 years ago.

Starkey has had roles in some successful movies — *Love, Simon*; *The Hate U Give* — but his biggest success pre-*Queer* was *Outer Banks*, a sun-drenched teen drama that became a Netflix hit during the pandemic. Guadagnino had never heard of Starkey when he was shown an audition tape, for a completely unrelated project, and told he might be a good fit for Allerton. "He was capable of being enigmatic without being cliché," says Guadagnino. "Eugene could be a very cold character, but Drew could make him warm somehow." Guadagnino then looked at 300 other actors, but came back to where he began.

"I was visiting a friend on a set in LA and I got this call saying, 'Luca Guadagnino wants to meet you. When are you free?' '*Well, literally any time,*'" Starkey laughs. He didn't meet Craig until they got to the table read. No chemistry test beforehand, as might be usual for a film so reliant on sexual heat between the leads.

Sex is almost always important in a Luca Guadagnino film. It's when people are at their most vulnerable, where their bodies and actions can say things their mouths and minds might not be able to articulate. Sex is particularly important in *Queer*. Lee and Allerton are both, in their different ways, too repressed to plainly say what's on their mind, but they communicate sexually. "We talked about [the sex scenes] a lot, months in advance," says Starkey. "I think Luca thinks of them as a dance in a way. He wants these bodies to tell the story."

Starkey and Craig did, in fact, study some dance together, mostly for a surreal sequence that comes late in the film, but also to learn how to move together. "Neither Drew nor I are dancers," laughs Craig. "But by having that as a starting point, during rehearsal, rolling around with somebody, that's where it all starts. I hope viewers are watching these two and recognising there's something there."

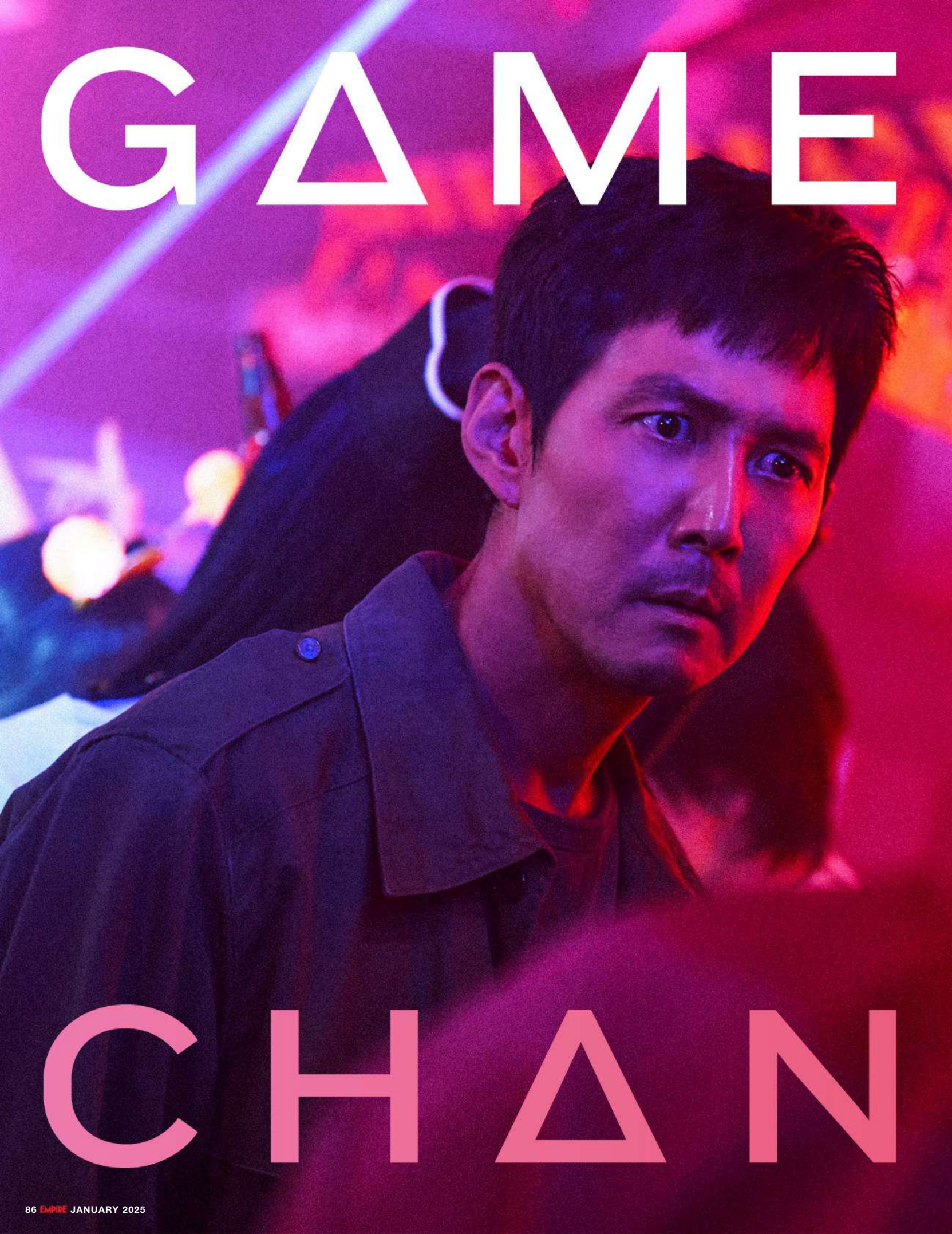
The film lays bare both actors and Guadagnino: Starkey stepping up as a relative unknown; Craig reminding audiences how many sides he has as an actor; Guadagnino setting his dream project, quivering and naked, into the world. "I've kept coming back to Burroughs for so many years," he says. "I had to find a way to get him out of me." Finally he is out, over 35 years of possibility now a reality.

FOR GUADAGNINO, COMPLETING *Queer* is more than just the realisation of a teenage ambition. It's the closing of a long chapter — probably an entire volume. By telling a story that's informed almost all his work between the ages of 17 and 53, he feels he's answered all his romantic questions for the time being.

"This movie signifies for me a natural watershed," he says. "What I'll be doing after and onward, I'll probably explore different thematics and textures and intersections." Perhaps spotting *Empire*'s perplexed look, he adds. "To say it more bluntly, I want to go a bit far from desire for a while. I want to maybe explore other elements of human identity and nature." Shortly after we speak, it's announced that Guadagnino is going to adapt Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, about as far from romance as you can get.

This is not, though, goodbye to love. "It will be interesting to see, maybe in ten years' time, how I will reflect on these things that I've been exploring for the first 25 years of my career. But I want to leave them alone for a while." His favourite book, and his favourite subject, are going back on the shelf for now, but you never know when you'll want to pull down an old favourite and view it with new eyes. True passions die down, but they rarely die out.

***QUEER* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 13 DECEMBER**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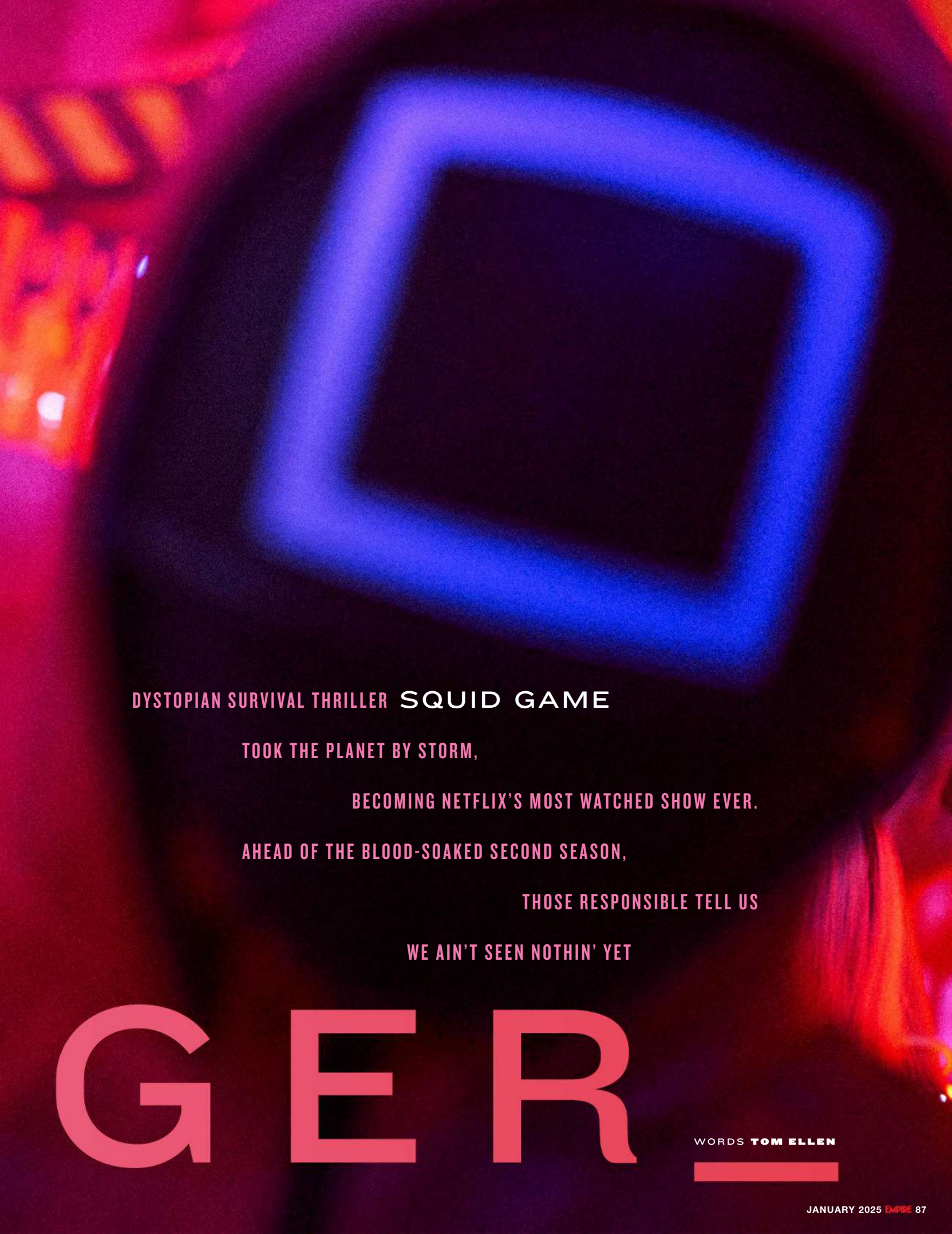


DYSTOPIAN SURVIVAL THRILLER SQUID GAME

TOOK THE PLANET BY STORM,

BECOMING NETFLIX'S MOST WATCHED SHOW EVER.

AHEAD OF THE BLOOD-SOAKED SECOND SEASON,

THOSE RESPONSIBLE TELL US

WE AIN'T SEEN NOTHIN' YET

GER

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

IF you thought taking part in *Squid Game* looked stressful, wait until you hear about making it.

"I lost six teeth due to [stress] during the first season," says the show's creator, Hwang Dong-hyuk. "Actually, it was probably more than six," he reflects, surprisingly matter-of-factly. "It was very tough. But I tried to ignore the pain and stick it out. I tried to keep going."

He succeeded, and the result was not only a hefty dental bill, but one of the biggest, wildest TV shows of the century. Landing on Netflix back in September 2021, *Squid Game* tracked the (mis)fortunes of debt-addled South Korean chauffeur Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), who is coerced into a secret series of deadly playground games, hoping to win a whopping cash prize. The series set out its bombastic stall in the very first episode, when what appears to be an innocent spin on Grandmother's Footsteps spirals into a bloodbath, complete with a giant, mechanised doll machine-gunning anyone in its eyeline.

The inventively gory action — combined with a sinuous plot and some highly snazzy jumpsuits — banked celebrity fans from LeBron James to Tom Holland to Liam Gallagher ("It's not rite [sic] in the head," was Gallagher's succinct summary of the series on Twitter), and notched a frankly ludicrous 1.65 billion worldwide viewing hours in its first four weeks, becoming Netflix's most watched show ever.

"I didn't dare imagine that level of success," admits Hwang, speaking to *Empire* via translator over Zoom from Seoul. "It was very shocking. The amount of love [for the series] was like an atomic bomb. It was so explosive." A second season was inevitable. But with that second season came a question: how on Earth to create something even bigger, wilder, less rite-in-the-head than the first outing?

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel the pressure of that," Hwang smiles, when we put the query to him. "But I try not to dwell on it. I believe what we've created on Season 2 is a deeper, more advanced story. I feel it could even surpass Season 1. But physically, mentally, it was not easy. Some of the sequences we shot were the most challenging in my whole career. It was..." He gives an exhausted chuckle, breaking out of his native Korean to speak in English for a moment: "It was *hell*."

Hold on to your molars.

TO CALL THE ENDING OF *SQUID GAME*'S first season 'divisive' would be to stretch the concept of understatement to breaking point.

In the final episode, having endured all manner of sadistic tortures — and watched friends, family and his fellow 455 contestants perish in front of him — our hero Gi-hun finally emerged as the game's victor, claiming the life-changing cash prize. But rather than allow the poor guy to board the plane to Los Angeles that would reunite him with his beloved daughter, Hwang had his long-suffering protagonist turn back at the boarding gate, seemingly intent on seeking revenge on the game's creators. Some fans were delighted at this rug-pulling cliffhanger. Others felt similarly to NBA star LeBron James, who complained at the time: "I didn't like the ending... Get on the fucking flight and go see your daughter, bro!"

The man who plays Gi-hun — *Star Wars: The Acolyte*'s Lee Jung-jae — laughs when *Empire* mentions the furore the finale caused. "I saw LeBron James said that. I get many people coming up to me, saying, 'You should have got on that plane!' I tell them: 'Yes, I should — but Director Hwang wouldn't let me!'"

As it turns out, Hwang had good reason. "Season 2 picks up right from that moment [when Gi-hun doesn't board the plane]," he explains. "The story is the process of Gi-hun trying to find In-ho, the 'Front Man' [the contest's sinister supervisor, played by Lee Byung-hun], and wanting to put an end to these games. But to do so, he has to enter back *into* the game."

During the scripting process, Hwang thought long and hard about the core aspects of the series he wanted to carry over. "If the overall tone is too grave and serious, then it's not *Squid Game*," he says. "So, [Season 2] is not all dark and heavy: there are many comical events and new characters that are absurd and funny, too."

Gi-hun is in many ways a 'new' character himself, a far cry from what Hwang calls the "clumsy, immature" chancer we met first time. "This is a hardened version of Gi-hun," confirms Lee Jung-jae. "He feels guilt for all the [other contestants] who were sacrificed. He is fixated on stopping the games."

The villainous In-ho is a different prospect now, too. The enigmatic 'Front Man' spent much of Season 1 with his face hidden by a black mask, either calmly sipping whiskey or even-more-calmly murdering people. In Season 2, however, "You will see many new facets and sides to my character," says Lee Byung-hun. "The Front Man gets to tell his own story — without the mask."

In his attempts to exact revenge on this now-barefaced Big Bad, Gi-hun will again run into the mysterious 'Salesman' (Gong Yoo) — a sharp-suited predator responsible for coaxing down-on-their-luck civilians into the deadly competition. "The Salesman plays a much bigger role this time," Hwang reveals. "And the way this character enters and leaves the screen will intrigue and shock everyone. I can say that with confidence."

Equally intriguing and shocking is the return of another Season 1 stalwart — police detective Hwang Jun-ho, who previously entered the games in disguise to track down his missing brother. Understandably peeved on discovering

Clockwise from main: Let the Games re-begin; Wi Ha-jun as Hwang Jun-ho, nursing some hard family truths; The Front Man (Lee Byung-hun) has now been unmasked — figuratively; Lee Jung-jae returns as Seong Gi-hun; Showrunner Hwang Dong-hyuk; Escher meets Barbie.

said brother was in fact the mask-clad Front Man, Jun-ho was last seen plummeting off a cliff with a bullet in his shoulder. "I was very happy to learn he was back for Season 2," says the man who plays him, Wi Ha-joon. "Having uncovered the truth about his brother made Jun-ho more hard-hearted. He's desperate to find his brother, and he partners with Gi-hun to bring down the people behind the games."

And Wi makes it clear that his character has had a rough old time of it since we last saw him. "The scene where Jun-ho opens his eyes after surviving was one of the first we filmed," the actor recalls. "I had to lose a lot of weight for it. The days before the shoot I had to watch what I drank — almost to the point where there was no water remaining in my body."

If you were wondering whether *Squid Game* 2 could live up to the gnarliness of its predecessor, there's your answer — an actor wrung dry on his very first day. But as the Front Man states in Season 1, "Everyone is equal while they play this game." So, if Hwang was intent on making his cast suffer for their art, he made damn sure to put himself through the wringer, too.

▲

"I SWORE I WOULD *NEVER* DO THAT AGAIN!" the showrunner laughs when *Empire* brings up the fact that Hwang single-handedly wrote and directed all nine episodes of *Squid Game* Season 1. "It was very stressful to do it all on my own."

Indeed, there are six (possibly more) missing gnashers that can attest to that fact. "He lost the teeth, but he also lost a lot of weight," Lee Byung-hun remembers of his writer-director on that first series. "He's a skinny man already, but every time I went to set he was skinnier. I'd think, 'Is this guy okay? Should he be hospitalised?' He would talk about it as a huge challenge, and say he'd never do it again."

Can we assume, then, that Hwang at least brought a few other writers or directors on board to lighten his load for Season 2? He shakes his head, dolefully. "I had one or two assistants, but it's hard to find someone I absolutely trust and let them take the wheel. So, I ended up doing all the directing, and almost all the writing, on the second season, too. It was exhausting."

And made even more so by the fact that the scale — and viciousness — of the games has notably increased since Gi-hun last competed. As our hero re-enters the contest as a tracksuited Trojan Horse, aiming to take the organisation down from within, he soon finds everything's ratcheted up.

"This series is not just larger and flashier, but more intense," grins Wi. Lee Byung-hun agrees: "Each time I walked onto a new set, I could not close my mouth." Among the most jaw-lowering of these stages was a huge, rainbow-hued sandpit, which required nearly two weeks of shooting and around 400 actors and extras. "I can't tell you what the game is, or what happens," says Hwang, "but I can tell you it was the most challenging sequence I've ever had to shoot in my life. There was flu going round, too, so everyone was sick and coughing and there was sand flying everywhere. Physically, mentally, creatively — not easy."

Ultimately, though, the struggle was worth it. "The sets are even more grandiose and beautiful than in the first season," says Lee Byung-hun. "Which makes the contrast of the harsh, brutal things that happen on them even more drastic." He laughs: "We [actors] used to joke that Director Hwang and our set designer *must* be perverts."

For Hwang, it's the world — rather than him — that's become more sick and twisted in the interim between Seasons 1 and 2. If the first *Squid Game* chimed with audiences for its unflinching study of capitalism and the darker corners of human nature, this second instalment has adapted to reflect what the director sees as civilisation's continuing decline. "It's not getting better out there — it's getting worse," he booms, switching to English again (Hwang seems more comfortable expressing doom and gloom in English — make of that what you will). "Worse climate change, more wars, more people dying. Compare the world [in 2021] and now — our lives are not improving. You know that! I even had some concerns because the story told in the second season is much crueller, scarier and more gruesome than the first." He pauses and shakes his head. "Honestly, I thought to myself... 'Is this too much for people to handle?'"

■

IF HWANG IS STILL UNDECIDED ON THAT question, the same cannot be said for his cast. A month out from the new season's debut, its star is champing at the bit for the world's reaction. "I feel butterflies in my stomach, of course," says Lee Jung-jae. "But the script is perfect, and no-one will be able to guess the twists and turns. It's way beyond your imagination."

"I don't dare predict how the public will respond," sighs Hwang, "or if the show will be as successful in terms of viewing figures. But I can tell you I'm not ashamed of what we've created." That said, he's fairly confident LeBron James still won't be happy: "By the end of Season 2, I think not just LeBron, but many people will be angered, saying, 'You can't end it here! How can you do this to us?!'"

Before Mr James gets too worked up, we should point out that this is only because Season *3* is already being primed to conclude the story. Written and shot in conjunction with the second series, it's currently being edited, and prepped for release next year. Hwang believes it will be the end: "I can't say for sure, and I can't swear off ever doing anything *Squid Game* again. But as of now I can tell you that *Squid Game* will see its finale in Season 3."

Two seasons wrapped up back-to-back, and this time he didn't even lose a single tooth. "No." The director's smile fades, and he wriggles his jaw: "But I currently have toothache, so I foresee a few more coming out soon." The real winners of *Squid Game*, it seems, are the dentists.

***SQUID GAME* SEASON 2 IS ON NETFLIX FROM 26 DECEMBER**

In The Red

WITH ROBERT EGGERS' *Nosferatu*, THE DIRECTOR FULFILS A LIFELONG DREAM – AND HAS PUSHED HIMSELF FURTHER THAN EVER BEFORE. WE MEET HIM TO WATCH THE FILM AND PICK OVER THE REASSURINGLY GORY DETAILS

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY

The devil, they say, is in the detail.

Robert Eggers is cinema's dark prince of detail. Each of his three movies up 'til now — *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *The Northman* — have been uncompromisingly period-authentic, every single item of clothing, every single object, every single beard in every single frame as accurate as possible. No ancient stone is left unturned. And with his long-awaited take on *Nosferatu*, he's really pushed the galleon out.

Eggers first watched F.W. Murnau's 1922 interpretation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as a kid and, like an infatuated vampire, became obsessed for all eternity. He directed an amateur stage production of it at school when he was 17, then was asked to mount a professional one, and has been dreaming about making a film version since. He wanted to follow 2015's *The Witch* with it, but it started and stalled more than once — that time, though, gave him the chance to refine both the script and his filmmaking chops.

To prep his iteration — which he'd write himself — he wrote a novella. "The source material is so close to me, but also it's so known, and I needed to just *own* it," he explains. "It had backstories for all the characters, and scenes that I knew would not be in the film, in order to just own the world and understand the characters better." Might it ever see the light of day? "It's terribly written, so no. It was a tool."

Whatever it takes. And to get a sense of just how deep he dived while making the film, we met him in the London screening room where he's been working on the edit. There, we sat down to watch — and unpack — four of *Nosferatu*'s early sequences... in detail.

A Monster Calls

The film's opening sequence features Lily-Rose Depp's Ellen as a teenager, in her bedroom, in the dead of night, visited by the demonic yet perversely alluring vampire, Bill Skarsgård's Count Orlok — at least in shadow form, silhouetted on billowing curtains. He talks with deafening whispers; she whimpers and whispers back, drawn to him, seduced by him, before finally levitating off the ground in a state of frightening submission. It's terrifying, and blisteringly loud.

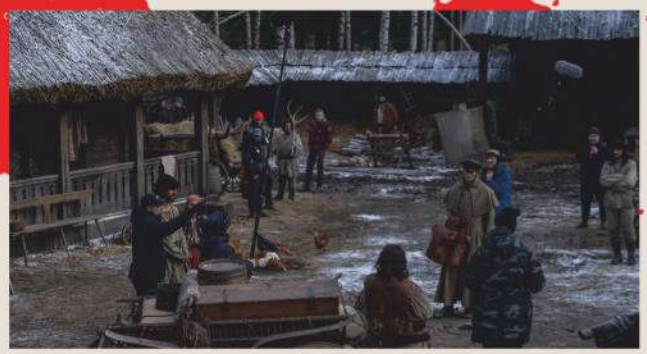
"It was difficult to light and grade this," says Eggers. With the set decoration, he wanted to hint at wealth in Ellen's family, but also he "wanted this [scene] to be like a void. We achieved it, but it was complicated." He points out a dollhouse and a small rocking horse — remnants from Ellen's youth. "But of course, it's very fucking dark and there's a vampire and subtitles, so how much you clock all this stuff on the first watch, I have no clue."

The subtitles are because Orlok is, explains Eggers, "speaking ancient Dacian, which is a dead language. It's what the ancestors of the ethnic Romanians would have spoken. He's doing ancient magic." Eggers employed Romanian screenwriter Florin Lăzărescu for the Dacian portions: "He's from Transylvania, and was very helpful with the folklore."

As Eggers' production fell apart over the years, so did his cast — various names were attached, significantly with Anya Taylor-Joy due to play Ellen, the object of Orlok's unrelenting attention. Ultimately, it landed with Depp, who is, says the director, "a massive Dracula fan. She's seen every Dracula movie, she's really at nerd level". It's an unrestrained, full-blooded performance. Her dance background suggested to Eggers that she could take on the physical challenges, and she did. "Her audition was shocking, she just totally went for it. The casting director and myself, even the videographer, we were in tears because she was just so raw."

From there, he had her work with movement choreographer Marie-Gabrielle Rotie, who, as she states on her website, has researched "possession, hysteria, human and animal hybrids and associated research into the occult and witchcraft". Rotie worked with Depp for months, significantly on *butoh*, a form of Japanese dance theatre; "*butoh*" means "dance of darkness". "I used *butoh* with Marie-Gabrielle in *The Northman*, on the Berserker transformation, and a little bit at the end of *The Witch*," says Eggers. "Also, Marie-Gabrielle and I looked at [neurologist Jean-Martin] Charcot's study of, quote unquote, 'hysterical' poses, 'hysterical' attitudes." They gave Depp drawings of them, "to see what would work in scenes when she's doing things that the contemporary doctors of the day would call hysteria."

Depp's work in this sequence, says Eggers, was all performed there and then, in camera. "It was one of the harder things for Lily to do, and she does it wonderfully, without any CG. It's all just Lily."



Far left: Writer-director Robert Eggers. **Main:** A teenage Ellen (Lily-Rose Depp) feels the lure of an evil presence. **Above:** Ellen is haunted by a dark force. **Top right:** Eggers directs a scene set in a Transylvanian village. **Above right:** The locals see red.

Building Transylvania

Years later, in 1838, Ellen is now married to Nicholas Hoult's Thomas Hutter. There in Wisborg she's having dreams, dark dreams, plagued by... well, dark things. Hutter tells her to not speak of it aloud. He is an estate agent and, in order to secure a big account, must travel to Count Orlok's castle in the Carpathian Alps. Eggers shows us a sequence in which Hutter arrives in a Transylvanian village: boisterous locals greet him outside an inn, their elaborate dancing and singing almost aggressively enthusiastic.

"This was the most difficult scene to pull off and to cast and to costume," Eggers explains. The village — or at least, what we see of it — was built for the film, and the scene, a crane-shot oner, is populated by Roma people the crew found in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Roma actors, Roma dancers, Roma musicians. "And then the people playing the ethnic Romanians in the inn were Romanian actors. So on top of it all, everyone speaks a different language," laughs Eggers at the complexity of making all this work. "Everyone who's speaking, we needed them to be speaking 1830s Romany. So, you can imagine."

It was difficult to costume, he says, because this period was "the very dawn of photography, so there are no photographs" that could help. They did, though, find engravings and paintings from the time, as well as amassing "tons of photographic evidence of Transylvanian and Roma folk clothing" from 40 years later, which they would then "sort of rewind" and work it all out. "It was very challenging."

With the song and dance over, Hutter enters the inn. Over the years, Eggers considered many actors for Hutter, but ultimately Hoult won out. Says Eggers: "His early work is so naturalistic, and then after working with Yorgos [Lanthimos, on *The Favourite*], and being in [Tony McNamara's TV show] *The Great*, his comic timing got so strong."

In this scene, he's faced with furious Romanian responses after mentioning that he's en route to Orlok's castle. Notably, there is an old woman who sends anguished, desperate warnings his way — not that he can understand what she's saying. She seems... real. "She is. She goes by the name Bunica, which means 'Granny', and she has a TikTok account that her niece makes for her, where she cooks traditional Romanian food. That's how we found her." So she really isn't an actor, then. "No, she's just a granny. She had some camera savvy because she's been on talk shows. And she has an imagination — she's from Southern Romania, but she did a Transylvanian accent for the movie. Which I wouldn't know, but she does." ›

Into The Darkness

Leaving the inn, Hutter moves on. We watch a sequence which finds him climbing the mountains; Eggers explains that a specific location he filmed in the Czech Republic is so recogisably Czech that initially he didn't want to shoot there. "These sandstone pillars are very identifiable, and there's nothing like this in Romania, let alone Transylvania. But the mountains that looked more Transylvanian were near the Polish border, and it was too snowy for us to do anything there." Sometimes, even Eggers chooses aesthetics over authenticity. The sandstone won. "We just said, 'Well, you know what? It looks very fucking cool.'"

Next up, quite possibly the prettiest shot in any Eggers film yet. Walking through the night, Hutter arrives at a forest crossroads, beautifully symmetrical, with heavenly snowfall. It's painterly, spooky and serene. It's quite staggering. "It does look good," agrees Eggers. "It was very difficult actually, to find a perfect crossroad. We looked at tons. This took a long time to find." What was he looking for? "Enough density that it would look super-dense and thick, but not so dense that you couldn't get the moonlight to shine through the canopy. There was one I liked better visually, but Jarin [Blaschke, cinematographer] said, 'Yeah, but I won't be able to light it.' And I said, 'I see your point.'"

It's not serene for too long. Suddenly, a carriage roars towards Hutter, its horses rearing up, squealing as they stop with a jolt in front of him. The carriage's tiny door opens of its own accord, beckoning Hutter to board. There's nobody else in sight. "In [Stoker's] novel and in the majority of the film versions, the Dracula character is driving the carriage in disguise," explains Eggers. "But I thought it would be cooler if there was no driver."

No corners were cut on the carriage itself. "I'm really, really happy with how this looks," says Eggers. "The amount of work that went into this carriage... there's all this intricate carving of the castle, and of the Transylvanian army cutting the heads off of Turks and all this incredible shit."

In prep over the years, Eggers absorbed every Dracula film under the (lethally rising) sun, and there are nods to many of them throughout. Two films he didn't rewatch: Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu The Vampyre* (1979): "I watched them so many times as a kid that it doesn't really matter, but I was trying to not do them." He couldn't help it, though; they're in his blood. "In the Coppola version, you have Gary Oldman in his weird fantasy armour, and he moves forward and [lifts Keanu Reeves] into the carriage," he says regarding his own shot of Hutter here. "This is a more Jean Cocteau version of that." The next shot, meanwhile, as the carriage approaches the castle in the distance, "is very much based on the Tod Browning shot in his Bela Lugosi movie [1931's *Dracula*]."

Finally, Hutter reaches his diabolical destination, Robin Carolan's score ramping up to hysterical levels, hooves pounding, rabid wolves barking. Hutter is being taken to hell. "You can't really see it, but Orlok's coat of arms is above the door," says Eggers. "It's on the coffin as well."

Ah yes. The coffin.

The gates close behind Hutter, the castle enveloping him. Orlok awaits. And he's not happy.

The Beast Unleashed

"You are *late*," booms Orlok.

He leads Hutter up a narrow spiral staircase. "I went up so many fucking spiral staircases in so many castles," recalls Eggers, weary at the memory. "This is definitely too large, but we needed it to be large to get the camera up there, and then also, because of lighting necessities, it curves the wrong way," he says, explaining how spiral staircases run clockwise, and this one goes counterclockwise. It might not be quite right, but it's what they needed: "We figured he's a Satanic magician so he can have a fucking backwards staircase."

Eggers points out the real terracotta tiles on the floor that were hand-painted for the production — because of the way the sequence is lit, though, "you don't really see the detail, but it's pretty incredible". He's said similar things about other shots today. What are his thoughts on such detail being so obscured in the final product? "Sometimes, we had bad luck," he says, "like the best acting takes having too much smoke [in the scene], but you just have to tell the best story. And the sense of having Orlok's coat of arms is better than not having it there. The accumulation of little unnoticeable details adds up to something that feels lived in and transportive and real and believable."

Hutter, contract in hand, is about to dine with Orlok, a truly demonic presence, moving around this cavernous hall like a phantom. He's shrouded in darkness, on every level. His voice, a rumbling, wheezing, upsetting Transylvanian nightmare, booms with arrogance and majesty. It is, somehow, all Skarsgård. Well, mostly. "When he attacks, there's animal shit thrown in there," says Eggers. "But when he's speaking, that's Bill. He worked with an opera singer [Ása Júníusdóttir] to lower his voice."

Hutter sits in a state of bumbling terror. "Nick's first movie was with Hugh Grant," says Eggers, of 2002's *About A Boy*. "I said to him, 'Don't go too far, but there can be a little bit of early Hugh Grant in Hutter.' He's trying so hard to not fuck up, and all he's doing is fucking up."

Skarsgård, meanwhile, is unrecognisable as Orlok — not just because of the shadows and darkness, but the all-consuming prosthetics. Yet still, this Orlok is not as outlandish as Murnau's or Herzog's. "In [Murnau's] *Nosferatu*, he looks like a fucking freak and Hutter's just like, 'Oh, whatever,'" explains Eggers. "That doesn't make any sense, right? And we're keeping the reveal for the right scene for the audience, but also, he wouldn't want to show his house guests that he's, like, an ambulating corpse."

More detail is pointed out as Eggers watches the sequence. He seems pleased. "I love the sound of his fingernail scrape," he smiles of Orlok's threatening talons.

Eggers is happy with all of it. "With the compounding dread and some jump scares and some gore, I think it packs a bit of a punch," he says of his film. "It has achieved my expectation, which is a shocking feeling." Everything is accounted for. And, dare we suggest, it feels like he ended up doing a deeper dive into it all than even he expected. "No," he laughs. Of course.

***NOSFERATU* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 JANUARY**

Above left: The menacing vista of Count Orlok's castle. **Left:** Thomas Hutter (Nicholas Hoult) enters of his own free will. **Above right:** Hutter finally meets Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård). **Right:** Hutter witnesses the horror.

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

JANUARY 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Riding the wind

DIRECTOR **LEE ISAAC CHUNG** ON HIS WHIRLWIND CHANGE-UP FROM *MINARI* TO *TWISTERS*

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

LEE ISAAC CHUNG must feel like he's not in Kansas anymore. Just six years ago, he had effectively turned his back on a filmmaking career that began with 2007's *Munyurangabo*, taking up a position teaching film in South Korea. "I was an 'easy A' professor," he laughs. "Which the other professors were more pissed off [with] than the administrators."

Chung had been frustrated with life as an independent filmmaker, struggling to get projects off the ground. And then everything changed in an instant. *Minari*, a deeply personal project about a South Korean family in America which he had written before leaving for Incheon, got picked up. More than that, it made a huge impact when it was released in 2020, becoming a serious player in the Oscar race; Chung himself got nominated for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. Since then, the career whirlwind hasn't stopped whizzing. First, he stepped up a budget level or ten by directing an episode of *The Mandalorian*'s third season. Next, he surprised pretty much all observers by deciding to stay firmly in the commercial realm with his next move: not a small, personal, independent project, but *Twisters*, the VFX-heavy follow-up to a 1996 blockbuster.

For Chung, who grew up in the twister-tastic Arkansas, it was a move that made perfect sense, and paid off in spades. Not only is *Twisters* a hugely entertaining romp that arguably improves upon the original movie, but it's one of the biggest films of the year, pulling in the punters particularly in the US, where destructive weather has become part of the daily conversation. *Empire* spoke with Chung over Zoom in October, and there was only one place to start: the eye of the storm.

What's it been like for you these last few months since *Twisters* came out?
Honestly, it was very cathartic in many ways. We had such a great response from people, and I just heard from people all over who were reaching out to me about what the movie meant to them. And I felt it was really timely for me, because before release, I was honestly not sure how this was going to go.

It's timely as well right now, because we're talking just as Hurricane Milton has been wreaking havoc in Florida.
Sadly, yeah. We ended up releasing this film after a very severe year of tornadoes. Last year, while we were making it, it was actually a quieter year, but this year it was much more devastating. Now we're seeing with these hurricanes just how quickly they can become very violent and unpredictable.

You grew up in tornado country. Were you always an expert, or at least *au fait* with the dangers of twisters?
I don't feel like I was necessarily an expert, in the same way I don't feel like I'm an expert about earthquakes while living here in Southern California. I'm used to the idea of them and

A24, Alamy, Disney, Warner Bros.

Above: Twist in the tale: extreme-weather fans Tyler (Glen Powell) and Kate (Daisy Edgar-Jones). **Left:** Powell, Edgar-Jones and director Lee Isaac Chung shoot the breeze.

I know that they happen, but the actual mechanics of why they were happening and what they look like, I really wasn't too aware of. It was only after I took on the job and started to research tornadoes that I felt I was getting to have a better education about these storms that I grew up around.

Obviously, we're living in a time where climate change is happening. This movie doesn't get on a soapbox about that. Was that deliberate on your part?

Yeah, I'm a firm believer in talking about issues and letting a work be about issues. But I really don't like when projects are preaching those issues. When I started working on this project, one of the things I asked the scientists immediately was, "What's different now from 20 years ago? What can we say about climate change? How can we convince people that there is a problem at hand with climate change, and we're seeing it in these tornadoes?" The scientists would say, "Whoa, slow down! Let's talk about the science." What they were telling me was that it's actually much more complex. ›

Tornadoes might have reduced in number and intensity due to climate change. That doesn't make for a very interesting movie! I didn't want to make a movie where we're saying that maybe climate change is a good thing in some ways.

So what did you do?
I felt like, "Okay, I need to dial back what my agendas are, and try to reflect what is happening on the ground, in real life." That's on the science end, but I think also that's really important on the human end. It's so easy to immediately put people in black-and-white categories. I feel like maybe I'm a little guilty of doing this with the Marshall Riggs character, and for David Corenswet's character, Scott, but in the script, Anthony Ramos' character of Javi was definitely presented as a type of antagonist. I just didn't want him to be a black-and-white antagonist because I don't feel that's the way things work in society. I felt like with the climate-change stuff that I did come under fire for the stance that I took — to not really talk about climate change in the film in a very literal way. I think in a metaphoric way there's a lot that's in the movie. But there was a journalist who said that I hadn't actually said the words "climate change", and then other people had picked up on this. But I stand by that. I feel like it was better to tackle this issue of climate change in other ways that are not going to immediately set people off, to just close off their ears. It's a much better thing to try to inspire a bunch of young people to get into the science and to actually research what's happening, and to see scientific inquiry as a beautiful thing. That's been in my heart a lot since the film came out and people reacted in that way.

You just wanted to make a disaster movie, a monster movie?
Yeah. Primarily it does need to be a fun movie. This is blatant name-dropping, but I got to see Spielberg a couple of days ago, and I was talking about the different types of projects I'm looking at, for what I might do next. He gave me some advice about how every project needs to be somewhat autobiographical. He said, "*Jurassic Park*, it's a guy who has these kids, [but] he just wants to do his work. Well, that was semi-autobiographical for me." There's so much truth in that. These projects, the reason why they exist is for them to be fun, but the reason why they work, I feel, is if there's that personal, human element that we're all tapping into as filmmakers, that really we care about.

That takes us back to something you said at the beginning about not being sure about how *Twisters* would do before it came out. When *Twisters* was first offered to you, you were coming off *Minari*, which was such a personal project for you. So I imagine you had a lot of conversations about the next step: is this the right thing to do?
Yeah, I definitely talked about that with different people. They were all asking, "Do you want to do this?" The answer was, "Yes... but am I crazy? I really want to do this. Is that weird?" But I think most people heard me talking about why I wanted to do this and they were very excited for me.

"I was a very bad film snob, I gotta say. So judgemental."

Top: 4DX? Pah. Gale-force wind hits a cinema. **Above:** Edgar-Jones, Chung and a heavy sky. **Clockwise from right:** Twister ahead!; *Minari*; Alan Kim and Youn Yuh-jung in the 2020 film.

Since *Minari*, you've directed some *Star Wars* episodes on *The Mandalorian* and *Skeleton Crew* as well.
It does feel like things opened up in a way that I'd never experienced in my professional life. And what I ended up doing is, I signed on to a bunch of things all at once. It's like the feast and the famine. Once the famine is over, you end up going for everything you can see. So I had to learn, through painful experiences of leaving projects, what I was looking for and what I needed to do.

You were attached to a remake of *Your Name* at one point, and that didn't work out.
That was a situation in which I just loved all the people so much. I like the animated film, but what I didn't realise is how hard it is to adapt a Japanese animated movie and to try to do that for America. That was the goal that Toho had put before us. But it's really hard to do. During the pandemic I worked on that script for many months, and ultimately came to a place where I realised I had written something I just couldn't even shoot.

***Minari* was almost the last-chance saloon for you, one final push at making it. How close were you to giving up and becoming a teacher full-time?**
I did take on the teaching position. I wrote the script before I took on the teaching position, and then I taught for a year, and it was time for me to renew my teaching contract, and that's when the script was picked up. There was an element of me already having given up, but also feeling an immense gratitude for my life and for my work, and for the fact that I had this

Top to bottom: Chung with Steven Yeun and Will Patton on *Minari*; Josef Rutagengwa in Chung's 2007 debut, *Munyurangabo*; Scenes from Chung's *Mandalorian* episode, 'The Convert'.

wonderful adventure with films I had made previously, and now I could teach. I had a lot of students who I loved, I felt a lot of peace about it. That was a wonderful, grounding experience that I needed to go through, to give it all up and then to be able to live out the dream afterwards.

You had made several films, but it seems that the process was quite frustrating, that things weren't moving as quickly as you were hoping for.

Yeah. I think it was hard because the films I was making were clearly not very commercial. My films tended to be quite minimal, with a lot of breathing room and a lot of stillness. I remember people walking out of my films quite distinctly. That happened quite a lot. I was a very bad film snob, I gotta say. I was so judgemental. There are even essays out there where I'm ripping apart films that I love now, and ripping apart Hollywood. Once I had my daughter, I started to take a lot of life a little less seriously. I took my foot off the pedal with what I felt films ought to do, and that's why I made *Twisters*.

Did *Minari* feel like a free hit? Did that give you something of a sense of freedom going into it?

What I love about that project is that in the script phase I had so much time to inject everything that I was feeling and thinking about life into the characters, into what was happening. That film was something I could work at in a coffee shop with no-one breathing down my neck, with no obligation. I wasn't thinking about whether it will get made. Once we got the green light, it never felt like freedom, to be honest, because they gave us $1.8 million to make the movie and everybody who looked at it said, "This is really at least a $3 million movie." There were so many compromises that we had to make as we were making it. Each day felt like we were not going to make the day. We have one scene in the movie that we shot in one minute. It's Jacob [Steven Yeun] walking out into the field with a flashlight, and then he picks up an eggplant — it's rotting, he throws it away. The sun was gone, and there was no chance that we could reshoot that. They gave us no margin for error and everybody stepped up. But at the end of it, we were all exhausted and a little bit angry. But we have a lot of pride about what we pulled off.

How would the Lee Isaac Chung of 15 years ago have reacted to *Twisters*?

Gosh, I know... I would have wondered, "What happened?" And I fancied myself a Marxist! I see a lot of these young people who are like that. There was somebody like that in a *Twisters* test screening. By their comments I was like, "Oh no, I know you. I *was* you."

***TWISTERS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Only Angels Have Wings

HOW HOWARD HAWKS REACHED FOR THE SKY

WORDS **RICK BURIN**

HOWARD HAWKS WAS flying around Mexico with a bush pilot when he first heard the story.

His companion had been to a dinner where a former showgirl was celebrating a year of marriage to "a fellow with a burnt face and great eyes". During the party, a friend stood up and regaled the audience with the full narrative of the couple's nuptial night — complete with timings.

"You son of a bitch, you were peeping!" the girl said. "No," the friend replied, bringing out a graph made by an airplane vibration monitor that had been strapped to the underside of the wedding bed.

"The girl hung up the graph," recalled Hawks later, "she was so proud of it. That's where I got the story of *Only Angels Have Wings*."

That's one version, anyway. Hawks told tall tales; sometimes he'd claim to have known the couple, even to have been at the dinner. What's certainly true is that he was visiting fellow director Frank Capra on the Columbia lot in mid-1938 when he was summoned by Harry Cohn. The studio chief was planning a first teaming of stars Cary Grant and Jean Arthur, but hadn't found the right project. Hawks handed him an outline of 'Plane Four From Baranca' [sic], which dealt with outcast pilots flying mail through the Andes. Two hours later, Cohn greenlit the film.

The vibration monitor didn't make it into the movie, but the showgirl did. She is Bonnie Lee (Arthur), who happens upon the self-contained world of Barranca Airways, a place of intense male comradeship populated by flinty people with the gooiest centres. Chief among them is flight boss Geoff Carter (Cary Grant), who only takes the missions too dangerous for anyone else. Bonnie falls for him, and decides to stick around, but Geoff's been stung before. Then into the picture sails the woman who stung him (Rita Hayworth) and her husband, a grim-faced flyer with a past (former silent star Richard Barthelmess).

What's astonishing about the film is how it fuses such pulp fiction with indelible personal philosophy. It is both the slickest entertainment Hawks ever produced — a model genre movie assembled like a watch — and a picture that runs deep, proving profound, and profoundly moving, on the subjects of professionalism, stoicism, and, as Hawks once put it, "a good dying". *Only Angels Have Wings* isn't merely the point at which its director's singular vision crystallised; it's the apotheosis of his art. It is also the soppiest 'tough' movie ever made.

The production was tricky. Arthur, who had spent a frustrating decade in Hollywood before establishing her unique persona, hated Grant for trying to upstage her, felt insecure next to Hayworth, and couldn't give Hawks what he wanted. The director had just met his future wife, Nancy 'Slim' Gross, who came to inform his notion of the ideal woman: sleekly and subtly sexual. "I can't do that kind of stuff," said Arthur, refusing (her conception of the character, though, makes the film more, not less, interesting). When the movie wrapped, Hawks told Arthur: "You're the only person I've ever worked with that I don't think I helped a bit."

By then, his film was 31 days over schedule, largely because of the constant changes made in communion with his cast and Jules Furthman, the last of four writers who worked with him on the script. While Furthman's talent was undeniable, Hawks said he and *Gone With The Wind* director Victor Fleming "were about the only people who could put up with the son of a bitch. Everybody hated him. He was such a mean guy that we thought he was just great."

The results of their collaboration veer awfully close to perfection. The greatest gift of '30s cinema, beyond even the ability to time-travel, is its dialogue: the articulation of vast emotions through shards of informal language. *Only Angels Have Wings* has just the right words, and just the right number of them. It's a film that knows when to talk and when to tail off, when to be blunt and when to engage in what Hawks called "three-cushion dialogue... because you hit over here and over here and go over here to get the meaning." A vivid example comes in an early exchange between Bonnie and Kid (Thomas Mitchell), Geoff's best friend. Geoff has left on a perilous flight, and Bonnie is quitting the scene.

Kid: *"Well, lady, you're really better off this way."*

Bonnie: *"Sure, I guess.* (Catching herself) *Now, look, I hardly know the man."*

Kid: *"Sure, but you'll get over it."*

The pair's later heart-to-heart remains one of the great scenes in American cinema,

Caption p.c Helvetica Neue LT Pro 6pt. Omnis molescia dunlis dit exped et maio.

Imago

showcasing two incomparable actors at their peak, and abandoning pool-hall obfuscation in favour of a shattering sincerity. "What do you do when he doesn't come back when you expect him to?" asks Bonnie, straining to be stoic, wanting to learn how. Kid pauses. "I go nuts," he says.

Already Bonnie has been confounded by the community's way of stomaching tragedy. The film's remarkable treatment of mortality is exemplified by the scene in which the pilots pointedly ignore the violent demise of a fellow flyer. "Who's Joe?" asks Geoff, tucking into his late pal's steak dinner.

It is one way of dealing with death.

In 1919, when Hawks began to seriously pursue a Hollywood career, he was joined by his brother, Kenneth; the pair were uncommonly close. A decade later, while directing aerial scenes for *Such Men Are Dangerous*, Ken was killed in a mid-air plane crash. Hawks' matter-of-fact account could have made for a scene in *Only Angels Have Wings*: "Ken wasn't much of a flyer, and I said, 'You'd better look out, you're liable to run into one another.' ... When they called me and said there'd been an accident, I said, 'Did they run into each other?' and they said, 'Yes.'"

In *Only Angels Have Wings*' fatalistic finale, the hero eschews the convenient fictions typically offered to the dying. "Your neck's broken, Kid," Geoff tells his friend, bluntly. Grant, already giving the most uncompromising performance of his career, wanted to make the delivery gentler. "No," said Hawks. "Hit him with it."

The director's masterpiece is many things — an enrapturing hangout movie, a feat of world-building, a monument to Hollywood excellence from the town's miracle year — but it is that code for living, in which honesty is the greatest love, that gives the film its extraordinary and enduring power.

***ONLY ANGELS HAVE WINGS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

Clockwise from main: Richard Barthelmess as pilot Bat MacPherson; Chocks away!; Don 'Red' Barry as Tex; Tragedy hits; Lovestruck? Geoff (Cary Grant) and Bonnie (Jean Arthur) heat up the screen.

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 ALIEN: ROMULUS

(OUT 2 DECEMBER, DVD/BR/4K BR)

Fede Alvarez's instalment in the *Alien* series makes a few missteps, but as an engine of pure tension it's the most successful entry since James Cameron's *Aliens*, with cracking set-pieces that'll have you hugging your face, but hopefully not bursting your chest, in terror.

2 STRANGE DARLING

(OUT 2 DECEMBER, DVD/BR/4K BR)

J.T. Mollner's twisty-turny serial-killer thriller not only has one of the great surprises of the year, it *is* one of the great surprises of the year. Beautifully shot by Giovanni Ribisi, of all people, it's a structurally unconventional tale of what happens when two unusual people (played by Kyle Gallner and the amazing Willa Fitzgerald) meet. If you haven't seen it, that's all I'm telling you. You can thank me later.

3 GODZILLA MINUS ONE

(OUT 2 DECEMBER, DVD, BR, 4K BR)

Arriving on all formats, Takashi Yamazaki's stunning *Godzilla* movie tackles weighty themes (it's set just two years after World War II, with Japan still wrestling with its part in it all) and gigantic action sequences with equal aplomb. And the effects are astonishing.

4 THE STONE TAPE

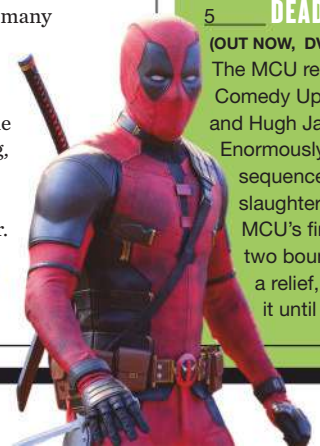
(OUT 9 DECEMBER, BR)

Deeply chilling and incredibly influential, writer Nigel Kneale's 1972 spook story (directed by Peter Sasdy) gets a welcome release on Blu-ray. If you have skin, this'll get under it.

5 DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/4K BR)

The MCU receives an MCU — Major Comedy Update — as Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman go full Marvel Jesus. Enormously entertaining (the opening sequence, in which a sacred cow is slaughtered repeatedly, is one of the MCU's finest), it's a blast to see these two bounce off each other. Which is a relief, as Disney will make them do it until they're 90.



Time Capsule

Billy Crystal

THE LEGENDARY COMEDIAN ON GREAT IMAGES FROM HIS GLITTERING CAREER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

OVER THE COURSE of an incredible 50-year career, Billy Crystal has turned pretty much everything he's touched to, well, crystal. Stand-up? Check. Starring in (and occasionally writing and directing) a string of much-loved comedies? Check. Hosting the Oscars repeatedly and splendidly? Check. Horror, with his new Apple TV+ show, *Before*? Check check check. But he's never been the subject of *Empire*'s Time Capsule before. "Thanks for reminding me of all these great moments," he tells us, before dropping the punchline with typically precise timing. "And how old I am." We'll have what he's having.

WHEN HARRY MET SCARY
BEFORE (2024)

"It's a world that I love being in, this psycho-dramatic thriller, scary kind of world. At this point in my career, to get a chance to play something different was thrilling. I love being in this dark kind of space. When I'd have to experience something really dark on the show, when they'd say, 'Cut,' I would just giggle, going, 'Look what I get to do.' That's Dr Eli Adler with his young patient, Noah Sawyer, who's played brilliantly by a young English actor named Jacobi Jupe. He's extraordinary. He's 11, he plays eight. That's how good he is."

FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT
WHEN HARRY MET SALLY (1989)

"That's Meg [Ryan] and I in Katz's Deli in New York, which is still there. That table now has a card hanging over it. You can sit at the Harry and Sally table, and 35 years later, people come and recreate the scene. When the first test screening came, Rob [Reiner, director] and I were sitting in the back, and that scene came up. It was insane how well it was playing. And at the end of that scene, we realised we were holding hands, it was so incredibly exciting."

SKULL AND BONES
HAMLET (1996)

"I'm not someone who gets nervous. But I've never been more nervous. I get to rehearsal and it's a beautiful set at Shepperton, and there's Ken [Branagh], he's Hamlet. He knows I'm nervous. So he says, 'Get in the grave, let's rehearse.' And I start, and he goes, 'Wait, you're Robert De Niro, and I'm Joe Pesci. Let's do it that way.' So he starts and sounds just like Pesci. I pick up the skull — 'You know who this is? Do you know who this is? This is Yorick.' It relaxed me. Then he said, 'You good?' I said, 'Good.' And we started shooting."

Alamy, Apple TV+, Getty Images, Imago, MGM

PERKING UP
FRIENDS (1997)

"Oh yes, that's Robin [Williams] and I at *Friends*, with an incredible group of wonderful young actors. Robin and I were shooting a movie called *Father's Day* — we're actually in our wardrobe here. They came over and said, 'We're shooting right over here at Central Perk, would you guys want to come over and see if there's anything?' We went, 'Sure'. And we just improvised this whole thing about his wife was having an affair, and we got up and left, and never saw them again. He was my closest friend. Any of the moments we had together were joyous. Special."

NO TICKET
THROW MOMMA FROM THE TRAIN (1987)

"That's a dark movie, but it's really funny. Danny [DeVito] was amazing to work with, and what he put Anne Ramsey, who played Momma, through. This scene was scary. There's an area outside of Los Angeles that has four miles of train tracks that you can shoot on. And Danny pushed her, he had her upside down, and he just tormented her. But she had a harness that she could be in so she was safe. She was hilarious. A really fascinating actress. She was nominated for an Academy Award for it."

THE MIRACLE MAN
THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

"I wish we had the outtakes of this. I don't think they exist. Rob [Reiner, director] actually had to leave the set because he was laughing too hard, because I went off. It got pretty blue. There's a very blue version of Miracle Max that's a little more demented. I only shot three days, and no-one ever saw my face. Carol Kane and I would stay in the make-up and go to lunch in the commissary at Shepperton. We would stay in character. I would say, 'Is the kidney pie somebody's real kidney?' She'd say, 'Max, you can't have that. Cholesterol.' 'I can't even spell cholesterol. Do you have it?' It was very funny."

LIVE FROM NEW YORK
MR. SATURDAY NIGHT (1992)

"Oh, that's David Paymer and I, and that's the first day of shooting in Central Park on *Mr. Saturday Night*. It was November 11, I remember, and you lose the light around ten to four. So David and I got to make-up at two o'clock in the morning and it took four or five hours. We had a lot to do that day. I got back to the hotel at 11 o'clock that night, and I had to go back the next day at two o'clock again. So it's like, why bother taking the make-up off? I did that for nine straight days of shooting. It was gruelling. My nickname on the set, from all the strong union guys, was 'Ironballs'. 'Good morning, Ironballs.' They couldn't believe I was doing this over and over and over again."

THAT'S NOT A KNIFE
CITY SLICKERS (1991)

"*City Slickers* was a joy to make. And the fact that Jack [Palance] won the Oscar, and I was hosting that night, and he came up on stage and did one-arm push-ups, that gave me food for the rest of the show. I loved him dearly. Prior to that, at the Golden Globes, I was up for Best Actor in a comedy and he was up for Best Supporting Actor. So he wins, and makes a pretty good speech and comes back to the table. I said, 'Jack, you're supposed to go to the press room.' He goes, 'No, I want to be here when you win.' So, my award comes up and I lose. He gets up. I go, 'Jack, where are you going?' 'The press room. You lost!'"

BEFORE IS ON APPLE TV+ NOW

SPOILER SPECIAL

Longlegs

WRITER/DIRECTOR OSGOOD PERKINS ON THE KEY MOMENTS OF HIS HORROR HIT

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

LONGLEGS IS EVERYWHERE. There's a good chance that you saw at least one person dressed as Nicolas Cage's Satan-worshipping serial killer, the titular terror of Osgood Perkins' breakout horror thriller, this Halloween. Comedian Taran Killam did an entire episode of *Comedy Bang! Bang!* in character as Longlegs. And you can't move on social media without bumping into someone posting a clip of Longlegs' song — not once, not twice, but as many times as they like. And none of this was a surprise to the character's creator. "It's what I wanted to do," Perkins tells *Empire*. "I wanted to make a villain that people loved, that people had affection for. Ever since I was a kid, I've always been more interested in the villain." Yes, he's Anthony Perkins' son, alright. Here, the director talks us through some of *Longlegs*', and Longlegs', key moments.

MEET LONGLEGS

The film introduces us to its main attraction immediately, as he rocks up at the home of a young girl (whom we will later find out grows up to become the film's hero, Maika Monroe's Agent Lee Harker) and starts as he means to go on: being intensely odd. But he's carefully framed, with the audience only seeing the bottom half of his face... until he suddenly drops down into frame, for the first of the film's sensational jump scares. "It seemed obvious to me that this guy was going to be hard to see, because it's her memory," says Perkins. "That comes from great painters I like, like Robert Motherwell."

THE VISION

Another cracking jump comes later when Lee retreats to her room and, in a box of her old childhood things, finds pictures taken of her, by Longlegs, during their first meeting. When she touches one, she has a sudden, overwhelming psychic flashback. "We designed this slideshow with the guys at Filmograph, Aaron Becker and his team, who do all my titles, based on Ritchie Blackmore and Rainbow, the sort of Ronnie James Dio look," says Perkins. "If you slow that down, you'll see there's this reverse-negative rainbow-tinted nun thing, which was just heavy metal to me."

THE INTERVIEW

The film's pivotal scene comes when Longlegs, having been captured by the cops, finally comes face-to-face with Lee in an interrogation room. Perkins wanted to make sure that Monroe's reactions were genuine, and so not only made sure she didn't see what Cage looked

like before she entered the room for the first take, but also that they hadn't even met. "I can keep everything from her and give her, as an actor, something that's so hard to come by, which is an authentic reaction," says Perkins. "Because when you're here, your scene partner is Nicolas Cage and he's fully in it and he doesn't look like himself and doesn't sound like himself. It's a trip."

LONGLEGS, SHORTFACE

Not for the first time in his career, Cage takes his face off as Longlegs, in a shocking denouement to the meeting with Lee, and commits suicide by ramming his head repeatedly into the table. "I wanted him to die closer to the middle of the movie than anywhere else," says Perkins. "I wanted him to be out of the way, so I knew this was going to be his big moment." His final words? "Hail Satan." "What else is he going to say?" laughs Perkins. Which is a fair point.

THE LULLABY

Longlegs may be gone, but his twisted agenda lives on in the form of his disciple, who turns out to be Lee's mum, Ruth (Alicia Witt). In an extended sequence, narrated by Witt in a sing-song voice that makes it feel like a fairy tale, Ruth tells the story of how she agreed to be Longlegs' accomplice, smuggling mind-warping devil dolls into the homes of unsuspecting families in exchange for keeping Lee alive and unharmed, only for, somewhere along the way, her job to become her hobby. "This movie's about the fact that your parent can lie to you, and they can lie to you to protect you," says Perkins. "And Longlegs is really the most grotesque version of that." Perkins says that his approach to Ruth's reveal changed somewhat in the edit. "There's seven or eight pages of dialogue, where her mom really talks a lot," he says. "We said, 'What if it's story time? What if the theme of the movie is your parents can tell you a story — what if we just did that and it became a bedtime story?' It took us a while to get it right."

STAND UP, LEE HARKER

Perkins also had to do a bit of editing jiggery-pokery for his climax, in which Lee rushes to the home of her boss, Blair Underwood's Carter, in an attempt to stop him from slaughtering his family while under the mind control of a Ruth-delivered, Longlegs-manufactured doll. "The wildest thing about that scene is that she comes in, and Carter yells at her to sit down, and she sits down," says Perkins. "We shot two days of her sitting down. She would never sit down! What was I thinking? She's not going to sit down at this moment, so we actually had to reconfigure the footage we had so that Lee never sits down." How did he do it? "We just found a way. We found takes, we found angles, we had to make it so that she never sat down."

THEORY DEBUNKED

As for the ending, in which Lee ends up killing her mum and Carter, and seems to save Carter's daughter, some have interpreted the final shot of Lee, seemingly frozen in place, as an indicator that she's about to fall foul to the malign influence of Longlegs' doll. Perkins is having none of it. "It's just meant to be a tragedy," he says. "The devil picks your family and fucks with it, just like it did in *The Exorcist*. In *Longlegs*, it's, 'Take this person who [he] met when she was nine and send her through the worst possible experience that she can have.' Have her shoot her mom in the head —that's as bad as it gets. And that's it. There is no more. It's the worst day of her life." To paraphrase Longlegs himself, Perkins is not afraid of a little dark.

***LONGLEGS* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

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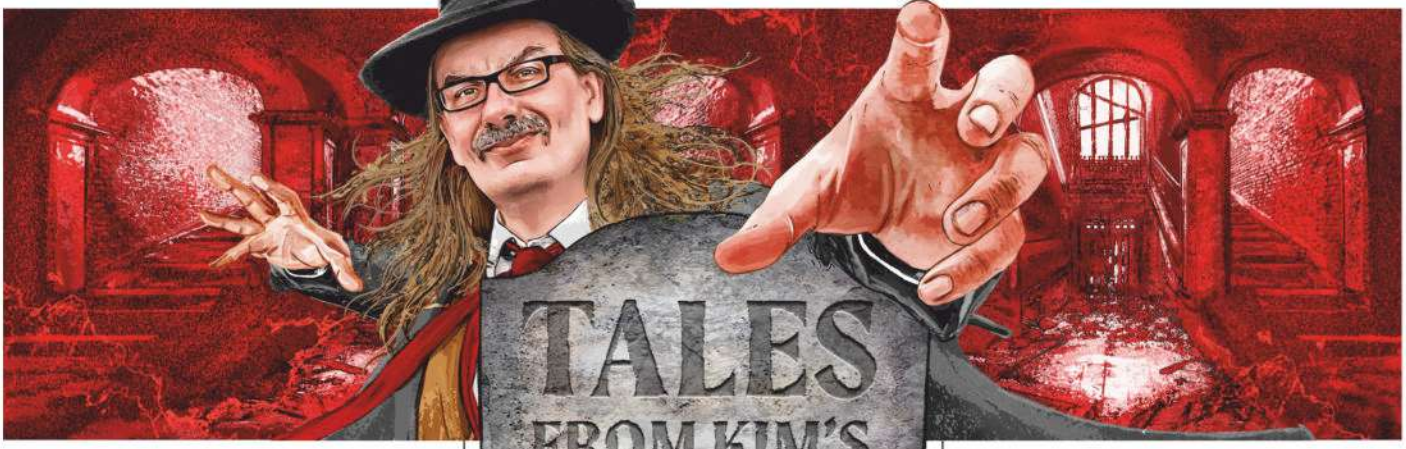


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

NOSFERAT-ISH

A GREAT MANY articles are going to describe Robert Eggers' upcoming *Nosferatu* as the third version of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony Of Horror* (1922) — which Werner Herzog already remade as *Nosferatu The Vampyre* (1979). A little digging unearths the fact that Eggers' 'Nosfera3' is about the 30th take on Murnau's film — itself a disguised-to-avoid-copyright-lawyers version of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Indeed, there are films called *Nosfera2* and *Nosferatwo* — not to mention *Son Of Nosferatu*.

Pretty much all the *Nosferatu* derivatives listed here are findable online. (Check out my list (with links) of multimedia Dracula appearances at johnnyalucard.com/2020/11/10/your-daily-dracula-archive.) Murnau's film turns Count Dracula into Count Orlok, played by Max Schreck with bald dome, bat-ears and a beaky nose, reaching out for victims with extensible clawfingers. Elements invented by Murnau — like the vampire dissolving in sunlight — have become standard in vampire movies and almost every Dracula picture borrows something from the 1922 rough draft of the book ... while Schreck's remarkable make-up job is often imitated, with Klaus Kinski in Herzog's film and Reggie Nalder in *Salem's Lot* (1979) getting closest to the original for sheer creepiness.

Villains called Nosferatu pop up in Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1966) and Corrado Farina's *They Have Changed Their Face* (also known as *They've Changed Faces*, 1971), and Kinski semi-reprised his role in a strange sequel, *Nosferatu In Venice* (1988). Interim remakes of *Nosferatu* include a home-made American gore movie *Red Scream Nosferatu* (2009) and a Russian animated kids' film, *Nosferatu Horror Of The Night* (2010), while homages include the sloppy comedy *Nosferatu's Crush* (2004), in which Nosferatu turns out to be innocent of the bloodsucking murders and gets a proper love interest, and the slasher film *Mimesis: Nosferatu* (2020), in which a psycho art troupe stage a theatre version of the Murnau movie to cover for onstage mass murder. Even further into multimedia weirdness is *NYsferatu: Symphony Of A Century* (2015-'17), a live music-and-movies exhibit which includes animated segments remaking scenes from the film. Meanwhile, the repulsive monster Orlok managed to be a recurring guest character on *SpongeBob Squarepants* and *The Fast Show*.

You can find a ton of short films online riffing on Nosferatu and Orlok (*Nosferatu: The Friendly Vampire*, 2004; *Nosferatu Vs. Father Pipecock & Sister Funk*, 2014; *Nosferatu Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, 2012). My picks for the most interesting: Peter Straughan's *Nosferatu In Love* (2004), with Mark Strong in the make-up as an actor having romantic woes during the filming of another *Nosferatu* remake; Arthur Dark and Nathan D. Lee's *The Tomb Of Nosferatu* (2023), a silent pastiche in which film historians revisit the locations of Murnau's film and are haunted by a familiar shadow; and Nick Hilligoss' brief, clever claymation skit *Orlok Holmes* (2022), in which the nosy vampire adopts a deerstalker and a pipe and passes himself off as a detective of the night.

Top to bottom: Bloody Mary? A date from hell in *Nosferatu's Crush*; *Nosferatu Horror Of The Night*.

CRYPT KEEPERS KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

CASH OUT
(DIGITAL)

Teaming suspiciously stubbled heist mastermind John Travolta with near-retirement FBI hottie Kristin Davis suggests one of those autopilot quickies for older viewers, but this *Inside Man*-style caper has a bit more going for it. Decent plot-twists, appealing leads and old-fashioned charm help.

HELL HOLE
(DIGITAL)

A gruesome, intelligent monster movie from the Adams family, makers of *Hellbenders*. A fracking expedition in Serbia unearths a living French soldier from the Napoleonic Wars who is incubating a squid-like parasite which migrates from host to host. A fresh take on the familiar *Thing* set-up.

THE LAST DEAL
(DIGITAL)

With cannabis legalised in California, dealer Anthony Molinari struggles to stay in what used to be a criminal enterprise. He takes a loan from sketchy folk to buy into an obvious scam and bad stuff ensues. Okay crime drama, worth watching if you're thinking of retraining as a hit man or drug pusher.

NO WAY UP (2024)
(DIGITAL)

This month's cheapo shark sandwich, set in the Pacific after a plane crashes, is basically *Airport '77* with sharks and fewer big-name fatalities. You have to love Phyllis Logan playing a nan who turns out to be an army nurse who patches up stumps and gives much poorer actors side-eye.

YOU CAN'T RUN FOREVER
(DVD, BR, DIGITAL)

J.K. Simmons plays a lecturer (an appalling person even before he turns spree-killer) hunting teen Isabelle Anaya in the woods after murdering her stepdad (and half a dozen other folks). A fair suspense shocker, with Simmons an entertaining menace.

STORY OF THE SHOT

The Third Man

HOW ORSON WELLES' SMILE STOLE THE LIMELIGHT

WORDS **IAN FREER**

THE ORIGINS

Appearing roughly halfway through the movie, Harry Lime's (Orson Welles) arrival into Carol Reed's 1949 classic *The Third Man* is not only one of the greatest entrances in movie history, it also gifts us possibly the medium's most memorable smile (sorry, Bruce The Shark). In Vienna looking for his missing childhood friend, slippery racketeer Lime, American author Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) suspects he is being followed down a dark street. As he calls for his pursuer to reveal himself ("Come out, come out, whoever you are!"), the yelling causes a woman to turn on a light, illuminating a face in a doorway Martins immediately recognises as Lime. Graham Greene's script describes Lime's smile as one of "amused geniality, a recognition that his happiness will make the world's day". With charisma to burn, Welles delivers a devilish but twinkly grin for the ages.

THE SHOOT

Lime's entrance was shot during the bitterly cold Viennese winter of 1948. The scene was captured by the night unit — there was also a day and sewer unit — led by legendary cinematographer Robert Krasker, who shot David Lean's *Brief Encounter* and Reed's *Odd Man Out*. The iconic doorway was at 8 *Schreyvogelgasse* — which translates as 'Shriekbird Lane' — one of a row of picturesque 18th-century houses often used as film locations.

Opposite number 8 was the *Dreimäderlhaus* that played host to the woman who turns on the light. As luck would have it, the house's location on the street meant said light hitting Harry's hiding place would feel perfectly plausible. Rather than coming from a domestic bulb, the beam that shines through the window came from a brutish arc light. The actual close-up of Lime smiling was shot months later on a soundstage at Shepperton Studios, in early 1949 — if you look closely, you'll notice the light comes on first in a shot of the window, then again in Welles' close-up, an example of continuity being discarded for dramatic impact.

THE LEGACY

Part of what makes Lime's reveal so memorable is the score. Discovered by Reed at a party in Vienna, Anton Karas was an Austrian exponent of Greek stringed-instrument the zither. The subsequent

Blizzard Studio, Netflix, Studiocanal

'Harry Lime Theme' is at once jaunty and melancholic and, as a true *leitmotif*, it only appears when Lime does (save the opening credits). It went on to sell a half-million copies by 1949's end.

Krasker won an Academy Award for his cinematography and the moment has influenced filmmakers ever since. "It's one of the great epiphanies in movies," says über-fan Martin Scorsese about Lime's introduction. "There's something about Orson Welles' smile at that point that shifts everything to another level, and it sustains no matter how many times you see it. So that might be the best revelation — or the best reveal, as they say — in all of cinema." Harry Lime has also been a source of parodies a-plenty, from post-modern cartoon *Pinky And The Brain* ('The Third Mouse') to indie darling *Me And Earl And The Dying Girl*, whose affectionate parody is called 'The Turd Man'. Now that's enough to make anyone smile.

***THE THIRD MAN* IS OUT NOW ON 4K BLU-RAY**

INSTANT TRIVIA

1
For the close-up of a cat slinking between Harry Lime's legs in this scene, a double stood in for Orson Welles.

2
Welles was offered £100,000 for around ten days' work or 20 per cent of the film's profits — he took the cash, using it to fund his version of *Othello*.

3
Producer David O. Selznick wanted Noël Coward to play Lime. Carol Reed and Graham Greene nixed the idea.

4
Assistant director Guy Hamilton went on to be a director, most famously of four Bond films.

Main: Orson Welles cracks Harry Lime's cheeky smile. **Right:** *World Of Warcraft: Battle For Azeroth*.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT TEAM AT BLIZZARD

DIRECTOR BENJAMIN REE ON HOW A BOLD PLAN PAID OFF FOR THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF IBELIN

BENJAMIN REE WAS nervous. The Norwegian director had spent years working on his new documentary, *The Remarkable Life Of Ibelin*, and now it all came down to this: would representatives of Blizzard Entertainment like his movie, following a special screening at the company's offices in California? "I was freaking out throughout the whole trip," says Ree. "When we arrived at the offices, I had to take some extra doses of asthma medicine in order to breathe. My hands were shaking. We didn't have a plan B."

Here was Plan A: *The Remarkable Life Of Ibelin* tells the story of Mats Steen (above, with his *World Of Warcraft* character), who, suffering from a degenerative muscular condition called Duchenne, spent thousands of hours constructing a second life as a wise adventurer called Ibelin inside the video game *World Of Warcraft* (owned by Blizzard). Ree's film documents Mats' story, which came to global attention after he died aged 25 in 2014, but he wanted to show the life of Ibelin inside *World Of Warcraft*. Official game footage was beyond his budget. So he improvised a solution. "It's possible to take out models from the game and put them into 3D programs and make animation without [Blizzard] knowing about it," he says.

Eventually, though, he had to seek Blizzard's approval. You can see why he was nervous ahead of that pivotal day. "I just looked down during the whole screening," he says. "And then I saw one of the bosses crying. He turned around to us and said, 'This film is fantastic. We will grant you the permission to use our work.'" And that is why 'The *World Of Warcraft* team at Blizzard' are thanked in the end credits. Plan A worked out very nicely.

***THE REMARKABLE LIFE OF IBELIN* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**

Not out of the woods

AS THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT TURNS 25, ITS CREATORS REFLECT ON A HORROR CLASSIC THAT WON'T DIE

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

IT'S HARD TO think of another contemporary film that shook up cinema as much as 1999's *The Blair Witch Project* did. Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, it reinvented marketing, terrified everybody, and made almost $250 million from its $35,000 budget. Its cast and crew inspired a generation of filmmakers and booted the found-footage genre into the stratosphere.

"This was our first feature film. Nobody had planned for it to be this big, to be this much of a phenomenon," says Myrick today, talking to *Empire* on Zoom alongside Sánchez. The original idea was for it to be a faux documentary about a witch in the Maryland woods, incorporating maybe 20 minutes of the supposed 16mm found-footage within it. The cast they found, though, changed everything.

Rogue from the start, the filmmakers went non-union. "We couldn't afford union actors," explains Sánchez. "And secondly, we knew that there were going to be rules that we were going to break. We wanted it to be completely real, and completely improvised, so we didn't write a script. We just wrote a long outline. And we knew they were going to be in the woods for at least 12 hours a day. We hadn't really come up with the idea yet to leave them out there for 24 hours a day. That was later."

They advertised in *Backstage* magazine, asking for three male actors and, through auditions, finding Joshua Leonard and Michael Williams, but also Heather Donahue who, says Myrick, "came in sort of on a lark and really impressed us. She had that right combination of determination and intensity and believability that you could buy the fact that she would keep driving and not take no for an answer." For the purposes of more instinctive improvisation, Myrick and Sánchez decided not to give the cast character names, having them use their real names instead. "Looking back on it, it probably wasn't a great idea, even though [none of the actors] objected to it," says Sánchez now. But more of that later.

Into the woods they all went, Myrick and Sánchez leaving the cast, who operated the cameras themselves, to their own devices. The filmmakers, rather than traditional directing, plotted and schemed, rigging some scares and, here and there, setting up conflict, playing them against each other. All three actors are incredible in the film, their conviction making something that feels startlingly — scarily — authentic. "We had some fairly complicated, spooky moments, and we weren't really sure how that would play on screen," says Myrick. "Because three piles of rocks outside their tents, that could be the most boring scene in the world. Or just hearing Ed and I [secretly] walking around and cracking branches, it could be just really silly. But the way [the actors] shot it, and their performances... when we saw the footage later we thought, 'If we edit this right, it could be really scary.'" It was.

> "Its shadow is still over us. It's hard to compete."
>
> **EDUARDO SÁNCHEZ**

Top to bottom: Michael C. Williams freaks out; Mysterious infant deaths are rife; An iconic moment from Heather Donahue; Beware the sticks!

Scary enough to become the entire movie.

Taking the conceit of the cast using their real names, distributors Artisan ran with that, keeping them off the press circuit, suggesting they were *actually* dead. And as the film was gearing up for release, the actors could barely pay rent. When Artisan made the execrable sequel *Book Of Shadows* a mere year later without the original cast or crew, Donahue, Williams and Leonard sued the company for using archival footage of them in it. "I don't blame them," says Myrick now. "I think the business is pretty brutal when it comes to exploiting filmmakers and actors and I applaud them for raising the issue."

This April, it was announced that Lionsgate (which acquired Artisan, so now owns all things *Blair Witch*) was rebooting it again, with Blumhouse. Donahue, Williams and Leonard

Top to bottom: Nerves start to fray; The would-be documentary's director of photography, Joshua Leonard.

responded with an open letter to Lionsgate asking for "meaningful consultation" on anything that would involve their names or likenesses, as well as requesting payments that they would have got if they'd had union representation in the first place. Sánchez and Myrick put out a statement publicly supporting them. "You have to, man," says Sánchez. "They're our friends, we've kept relationships with them. They definitely got the worst part of it."

The directors, meanwhile, had their own struggles with Artisan. "We had a rude awakening," says Myrick. "The business is not a kind business, and the distributors are not really your friends." The sequel *they* had wanted to make — a prequel, in fact, a medieval exploration into the origins of the witch — gained no traction. ("That bastard!" jokes Sánchez of Robert Eggers' 2016 *The Witch* — he and Myrick both loved it.) And doing *anything* after the huge success they'd enjoyed proved difficult. "There's a shadow of the Blair Witch, and it's still over us," says Sánchez. "It's hard to compete with it. It took me a while just to get out of my own head and say, 'I gotta make another movie eventually.' And it definitely did mess with me. But it's given me a career."

Both Myrick and Sánchez have made films since, together and separately, and Sánchez directs a lot of television. What they love the most, though, is how *The Blair Witch Project* inspired so many people, and continues to do so. Many, says Sánchez, tell him they went into filmmaking because of it: "It's an unbelievable privilege to have people tell you that." Donahue, Williams and Leonard, meanwhile, seem like a stronger unit than ever before. "We all go to conventions, and the actors get *so* much love," says Sánchez. "It's amazing to see."

They're united because of their grievances, their turmoil, yes — but also because of the incredible, unforgettable work they all did in the woods all those years ago. It warms the heart. "Amen, man," says Sánchez. "Amen."

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

1 What does the M. in 'M. Night Shyamalan' stand for?

2 He directed two movies before he hit it big with *The Sixth Sense*. Name them.

3 Shyamalan often cameos in his movies. In which one does he appear as 'Stadium Drug Dealer'?

4 What is the name of the tortured man, played by Donnie Wahlberg, who appears at the beginning of *The Sixth Sense*?

5 *The Sixth Sense* was one of the biggest films of 1999, but Shyamalan also co-wrote the screenplay for another summer blockbuster that year. What was it?

6 In *Unbreakable*, what is the real name of Mr Glass, the character played by Samuel L. Jackson?

7 In that same film, Mr Glass picks up a superhero comic in a comic-book store. Who is the superhero on the cover?

8 What is the name of Shyamalan's production company?

9 What is the name of the pop star played by Shyamalan's daughter, Saleka, in *Trap*?

10 The line, "Let's just stay ahead of the wind!" is from which Shyamalan film?

11 What links the following Shyamalan characters: Dennis, Hedwig, Ms Patricia and Orwell?

12 Who plays the unfortunate critic in *Lady In The Water*?

13 What is the title of the Paul G. Tremblay book upon which *Knock At The Cabin* is based?

14 Aaron Pierre plays a rapper called Brendan in *Old*. But what is his unforgettable (we hope) rap name?

15 How are the aliens ultimately sent packing in *Signs*?

16 In *The Village*, what colour is banned because it attracts the attention of mysterious creatures?

17 Bruce Willis' David Dunn is finally given a superhero name in *Glass*. What is it?

18 Which Shyamalan film was, at one point, called 'One Thousand A.E.'?

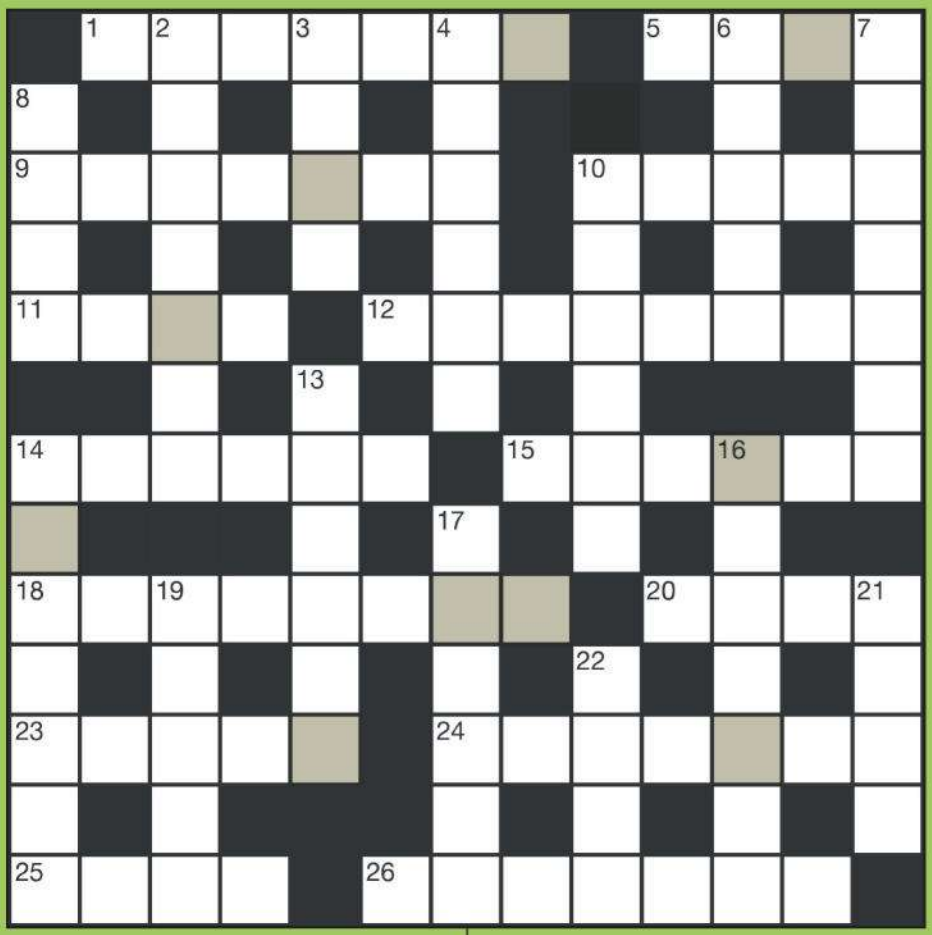
19 How many Oscar nominations has Shyamalan received in his career?

20 In his 'comeback' film, 2015's *The Visit*, what are the nicknames of the murderous grandparents?

ANSWERS 1 Manoj **2** *Praying With Anger* (1992) and *Wide Awake* (1998) **3** *Unbreakable* **4** Vincent Grey **5** *Stuart Little* **6** Elijah Price **7** Sentrynman **8** Blinding Edge Pictures **9** Lady Raven **10** *The Happening* **11** They're four of Kevin Wendell Crumb's 24 (don't forget The Beast!) identities, and all are played by James McAvoy in *Split* and *Glass* **12** Bob Balaban **13** *The Cabin At The End Of The World* **14** Mid-Sized Sedan **15** It is discovered that water is toxic to them **16** Red **17** 'The Overseer' **18** *After Earth* **19** Two, both for *The Sixth Sense* (1999) — Best Director and Best Original Screenplay **20** 'Nana' (Deanna Dunagan) and 'Pop Pop' (Peter McRobbie)

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Planet of Kara Zor-El's birth (7)
5 — *Of Dogs* (Wes Anderson film) (4)
9 It's what happened at Precinct 13 (7)
10 Brad's Booth from *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood* (5)
11 Dafne, who's played Laura and Lyra (4)
12/8 Down Tourist attraction on Isla Nublar (8,4)
14 Surname of hustler Fast Eddie (6)
15 Bryan Mills famously has a very particular set of them (6)
18/20 Across Gene Hackman-Barbra Streisand flop from 1981 (3,5,4)
20 See **18 Across**
23 See **2 Down**
24 It can finish *Avengers* and *Highlander* (7)
25/7 Down Soderbergh thriller with Rooney Mara (4,7)
26 Kathleen, movie mega-producer and Lucasfilm president (7)

DOWN

2/23 Across Marvel's Zeus and Kraven's father (7,5)
3 "Ever felt a little alien?" asked one of its many taglines (4)
4 *The* — (Saoirse Ronan film) (6)
6 Nationality of *Downfall*'s Bruno Ganz and *Dr. No*'s Ursula Andress (5)
7 See **25 Across**
8 See **12 Across**
10 Jordan Scott feature with Eva Green (6)
13 Her best friend is Thelma (6)
14 *Fargo* and *Nomadland*'s McDormand (7)
16 A name that links *Memento* and *The Big Bang Theory* (7)
17 Could be Cates, could be Dynevor (6)
19 Harry met him and Harold was him (5)
21 It's Joel, your Master of Ceremonies, or Jennifer, the dancer (4)
22 New Ron Howard film with Sydney Sweeney, Ana de Armas and Vanessa Kirby (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

AARDMAN GOODIES

CHRISTMAS IS COMING, the penguin's getting lively... Not only is there a new Wallace & Gromit tale for our viewing pleasure over the holidays, but Aardman has gone Christmas crazy with some Yuletide merch to solve your gift conundrums and brighten up your festive season. We've got one Shaun The Sheep night light (RRP £39.99), one illuminated Gromit (RRP £149) — beats a wicker reindeer, right? — and a Wallace & Gromit jumper (RRP £44.99) that will surely put others' jolly knitwear to shame, all for one winner. To be in with a chance of winning, crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the entry instructions below.

SHAUN THE SHEEP NIGHT LIGHT AND LIGHT-UP GROMIT AVAILABLE AT LIGHTS4FUN.CO.UK. WALLACE & GROMIT CHRISTMAS JUMPER AVAILABLE AT FORBIDDENPLANET.COM

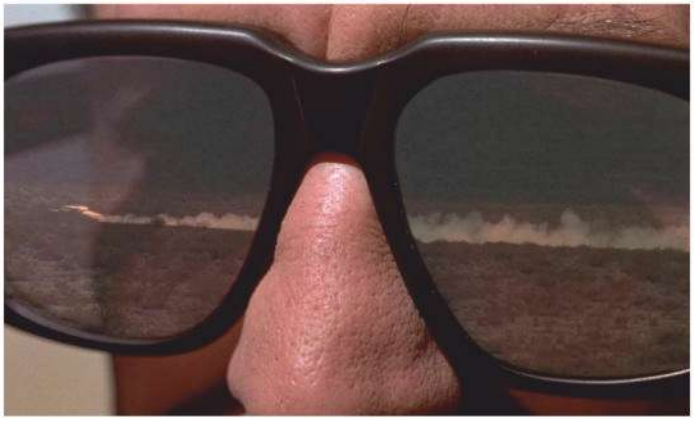
COMPETITION ENDS 16 DECEMBER

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 16 December. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

DECEMBER'S ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Field Of Dreams, **8** Seattle, **9** Brown, **10** Russo, **11** Catch, **13** Nikita, **15** Icarus, **18** Ellie, **20** Borat, **23** Oscar, **24** Penguin, **25** Happy Death Day. **DOWN: 2** Evans, **3** Detroit, **4** French, **5** Robot, **6** Another, **7** Sing, **8** Strong, **12** Ashton, **14** Kneecap, **16** Cabinet, **17** Temple, **19** Larry, **21** Round, **22** Goth. **ANAGRAM** AARON PIERRE

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 17 December or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

Prizes courtesy of Aardman



CLASSIC SCENE

THE DESERT SHOWDOWN

Casino

CHOSEN BY **TODD PHILLIPS**
(DIRECTOR)

TODD PHILLIPS: "I was just thinking about the scene in the desert in *Casino*, between Pesci and De Niro. I love scenes where two heavyweights go toe-to-toe. Scorsese is one of my favourite filmmakers, but *Casino*, I always feel like it doesn't get enough love, because it exists in the shadow of *GoodFellas*. To me, it's eminently rewatchable, like *GoodFellas* is."

EXT. DESERT — DAY

With things getting tense in the Las Vegas casino business, Ace Rothstein (Robert De Niro) and his mobster friend Nicky Santoro (Joe Pesci) have arranged a meet in the desert. One Ace isn't sure he'll walk away from...

Ace watches Nicky drive to the rendezvous spot, his car billowing a cloud of dust behind it, all reflected in Ace's glasses. Nicky pulls up, gets out, walks towards Ace, and wastes no time getting to the point.

NICKY: Where the fuck you get off talking to people about me behind my back, going over my head?

ACE: What people?

NICKY: What people — what, did you think I wasn't gonna find out?

ACE: I don't even know what you're talking about, Nicky.

NICKY: No? You said I'm bringing heat on you? I gotta listen to people because of your fuckin' shit? You're ordering me out? You better get your own fuckin' army, pal.

ACE: I didn't do anything. I didn't order you or anybody. I only told Andy Stone that you had a lotta heat on you and that was a problem.

NICKY: You want me to get out of my own fuckin' town?

ACE: Yeah, I said, let the bullshit blow over for a while so I can run the casino. Anything goes wrong with the casino and it's my ass. It's not yours, it's my ass.

NICKY: Oh, I don't know whether you know this or not, but you only have your fucking casino because I made that possible. I'm what counts out here. Not your fuckin' country clubs or your fuckin' TV shows. And what the fuck are you doing on TV anyhow? You know I get calls from back home every fuckin' day? They think you went batshit!

ACE: I'm only on TV because I gotta be able to hang around the casino. You understand that. You know that. Come on.

NICKY: You fuckin' ass — you coulda had the food and beverage job without going on television! You wanted to go on TV!

ACE: Yeah, I did wanna go on TV. That way I have a forum. I can fight back. I'm known. People see me. They know they can't fuck around with me like they could if I was an unknown. That's right.

NICKY: You're making a big fuckin' spectacle of yourself.

ACE: Me? I wouldn't even be in this situation if it wasn't for you. You brought down so much fuckin' heat on me and every time I meet somebody the big question is, do I know you?

NICKY: Oh sure, now you wanna blame your fuckin' licence on me, is that it?

ACE: No, Nicky... when you asked me if you could come out here, what did I tell ya? I mean, you asked me, I knew you were going to come out no matter what I said, but what did I tell you? Do you remember what I told you? Do you remember what I told you?

NICKY: Back... back... back up a fucking minute here. One minute! *I* asked *you*? When the fuck did I ever ask you if I could come out here?

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